Boku wa Tomodachi ga Sukunai Volume 08

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These are novel illustrations that were included in Volume 8

僕は友達が少ない 8

平坂読 yomi hirasaka

【illustrator ブリキ】

MF文庫J

僕は友達が少ない 8

平坂読 yomi hirasaka
【illustrator トーキ】

「……つ、つまり、えっと……、
なんか**そーゆーこと**だから……」

告白

Reflection: Prayers and Shouts

Let's talk about a hypothetical person.

Suppose there was a person who hadn't made a single friend in a long time.

He may have been born with a scary face, or have hair that looks like a delinquent's, or not be able to smile well, or get nervous when talking to people and start acting weird, or have *a little bit* of trouble reading the mood, or have a *slightly* different sense of humor than most... and it's true that most of those problems likely stem from his own appearance and inability to communicate well with others, but——... Above all, this individual **had bad luck**.

He failed when he shouldn't have, succeeded when he shouldn't have, lost when he shouldn't have, won when he shouldn't have, got mad when he shouldn't have, got happy when he shouldn't have, laughed when he shouldn't have, and cried when he shouldn't have.

He constantly did all the things he shouldn't have.

Perhaps, instead of saying he had bad luck, one could say that... **fate was simply against him**.

Anyway, suppose such a person existed.

Always alone, unable to find a place he belonged. That kind of person.

Then, suppose he, by some coincidence, obtained what he'd always been searching for.

If his father wasn't friends with St. Chronica Academy's chairman.

If he chose to go to America with his father when his father moved there for work.

If he didn't get on the wrong bus the first day of school.

If he didn't end up in the same class as his long lost best friend from 10 years ago.

If he didn't meet Sora on that day, 10 years ago.

If Yozora Mikadzuki didn't remember him.

If Yozora Mikadzuki had been leading a happy life with new friends.

If Sena Kashiwazaki had an amiable personality and had tons of friends among the boys and girls at school.

If Sena Kashiwazaki wasn't the kind of girl capable of taking Yozora Mikadzuki head-on.

If Maria Takayama wasn't the manager of Lounge Room #4.

If Maria Takayama had done well at the high school she transferred into.

If Yukimura Kusunoki wasn't under the false impression that he was a "cool guy".

If Yukimura Kusunoki didn't mistake herself for a guy.

If Rika Shiguma hadn't messed up her experiment as he was walking by.

If Rika Shiguma was really just a genius girl, unable to read the mood.

It was like a compilation of all those if's that would fall apart if even one were missing.

Who knows how it happened.

Perhaps it was a miracle.

Maybe fate had made a mistake.

No matter the reason, he had obtained it.

A place he belonged, a world of his own.

A world full of a comforting warmth.

He had desired it for so long, never able to obtain it, but then one day, all of a sudden, with no forewarning, it simply fell into his hands.

Of course, it's not like he didn't do any work for it.

He'd done many things to make friends and clear up the misunderstandings about himself—— at least, he tried to.

But—— The thing he had obtained was far too big for him to simply rejoice and write it off as the fruit of his labor.

I'd like you to keep that in mind as you think about the following.

As you try to imagine it.

As you try to imagine what moving on from that point would mean to him—— and why it would be so terrifying.

This little exchange happened back on the first day I met Rika Shiguma. Specifically, 129 days ago. (I bet Rika could tell you down to the minute how long it's been, but it's not like that matters either.)

"Rika is a science lab student."

Rika Shiguma said to me, as we stood in an empty stairway landing.

"...First time I've ever heard of that term before."

I doubted what she was saying, but Rika quickly explained it to me.

"You know how there's infirmary students who take their classes in the infirmary, right? What I do is like the science lab version of that."

Infirmary students.

A term made to describe students who, for one reason or another, take their classes in the infirmary instead of the classroom .

I later learned that a "science lab student" is considerably different than an "infirmary student", but... That aside, this is what I thought back then:

——I'm sure it has its problems and that not everyone agrees with it, but overall I think it's a good system.

——Most people are able to communicate with their classmates as though it were only natural, but there are people who just can't do it no matter how hard they try as well.

——It might even be right to call those people "weak" or " dependent", but... I don't think there's any problem with leaving those people *who can't communicate naturally* a small piece of salvation, even if that's the wrong thing to do. I want them to have that salvation.

Who cares if it's not the right thing to do?

Who cares if it's the wrong thing to do?

I don't think there's anything wrong with us outcasts having a few little miracles, or few small pieces of salvation here and there. I want those things to be there. They should be there. Please be there .

If not allowing people to be weak or dependent is what's "right" , then I don't care if I'm wrong.

...I left the rooftop as though running away from Rika, and as I walked, alone, through empty hallways on my way back to the track where the athletics festival was being held, I reminisced about the events of that day——

Opening Act

The athletics festival ended.

.....No, really, that's it. It's over.

Nothing particularly worthy of note happened, and much like the majority of the athletics festivals I've come to know so far, it just kinda ended.

The winner was the white team—— The team made up of all the class 3's.

All the events were completed with a modicum of excitement and minimal trouble, after which we all did some stretches together followed by the headmaster (not Pegasus Kashiwazaki, a different person) giving the leader of the winning team (class 3-3's class rep) the winner's pennant. The student council president, Hinata Hidaka-senpai, then gave a quick little speech, and finished by saying,

"I hereby declare St. Chronica Academy's athletics festival over."

Thus, the festival was now over.

We all changed back into our uniforms, returned to class, and ended the day after a short homeroom.

I then made my way to the clubroom while listening to an announcement being made over the speakers detailing the schedule for the cultural festival tomorrow, as well as an announcement reminding students who wanted to stay overnight to prepare for the festival to let their respective teachers know by six o'clock.

By the time I got to the clubroom, Yozora, Sena, and Yukimura were already there.

"Yo. Grats on the win."

I decided to greet Sena first.

"Heheh, it was obvious we'd win."

Sena said with a smile on her face as she flicked her hair up with one hand.

I doubt that anyone contributed anywhere near as much to the white team's victory as the girl standing before me, Sena Kashiwazaki, did.

She participated in as many events as a single student was allowed to, and took first place in all of them too.

You could literally see the opposing teams' morale plummet the second they saw Sena competing in an event, and the stands were always in an uproar anytime Sena was out there as well.

...Of course, it was mostly the guys making the uproar, while the girls (even the ones on her team) wore vaguely upset looks on their faces.

"I really am the goddess of victory! You could even say it was all thanks to me that we won!"

"Yeah, you probably could."

I agreed with her while making a wry smile, causing Sena to go "Ehehe~" and grin shyly like an innocent child.

"Your performance was one to rival that of Benkei's, Anego."

Yukimura stared at Sena with a look of admiration.

"I'm not sure how I feel about being compared to Benkei... but thanks, I guess. Feel free to praise my greatness as much as you like!"

In response to Sena, who was getting more and more carried away,

".....Peerless patheticness."

Yozora quietly said the above while reading her book.

Sena's face twitched ever so slightly.

"W-what did you just say...?"

"I said you're peerless in your patheticness. ...The girls in your class are just gonna ignore you even more now."

"Uu..."

"I can't believe you haven't learned a thing since last year's festival... you truly are a pathetic slab of meat."

...According to Yozora and Rika, last year Sena really went out of control and seriously creeped out all the other girls.

I can't deny that Sena performed magnificently in her events today, but... I can't deny that she stuck out like a sore-thumb from everybody else either. Yozora's probably right on the money with this one.

"Heh... Seeing you prance around like an idiot was quite the show."

"It's not my fault! It's everyone else's fault for not taking it seriously!"

"Hmph... Not everybody has a stupid amount of energy like you do."

"I-I know that... It's not like I enjoy beating weaklings all the time either. I just don't know how to hold back..."

Sena said as though pouting, and then let out a sigh.

"Hahhh, it would've been a lot more fun if you did a bunch of events too~"

"M-me?"

Yozora seemed slightly surprised by Sena's words.

Incidentally, the only event Yozora participated in was the all-girls ball-toss.

"Yeah. You'd try to use some dirty trick and have me on the ropes for a while, but then I'd turn it around and make a beautiful comeback. Wouldn't that have been fun?"

"How the hell would that be fun, you stupid piece of meat."

Yozora glared at Sena who was happily talking away.

"...I would have liked to see a battle between you both as well. I'm sure it would have become a famous battle in history."

Yukimura said in her gentle tone of voice.

"N-now even Yukimura's talking nonsense..."

A fight between Yozora and Sena, huh...

I imagined what it would be like if they went against each other in a cavalry battle or an obstacle race.

Sena would go straight for the win using her amazing athletic ability, and Yozora would try any number of schemes and tricks to beat her.

It would be just like that great battle they had in the game " Monster Hunter", only this time at the athletics festival (You're not actually supposed to fight other players in MonHun, but if you ignore that part then you could definitely call that fight they had back then a great battle).

"...Yeah, I think I'd wanna see it too."

I quietly said, causing Sena's eyes to light up as she replied,

"I know, right!? You heard them Yozora! You're gonna go up against me in a bunch of events next year!"

"A-as if I'd ever..."

Yozora said, but then faltered, and instead responded by turning her face away and mumbling,

"......Well, maybe. If I feel like it..."

"No maybe's, you totally have to do it!" Sena happily exclaimed back.

"A-anyway, about the cultural festival tomorrow!"

Yozora quickly changed the subject as though trying to hide something.

"The cultural festival? What about it?"

Sena asked, her head tilted, to which Yozora went "Uu..." and let out a small moan before saying,

"Ah, no... I was just thinking how I can't wait to see the finished version."

"We all can't wait."

Yukimura and I both nodded in agreement with Sena's statement.

A movie.

We at the Neighbors Club decided to make our own movie and show it during the cultural festival.

We'd already finished filming, making posters, and setting up our own little theater.

All that's left is to wait for Rika to put her finishing touches on it .

Incidentally, we'll be using the chapel's Lounge #2 as our theater where we'll use a projector to play the movie. The room is about as big as Lounge #4, our clubroom, but I doubt we'll have many visitors come by, so it should be plenty big.

...As for why we aren't just using our own room if the two rooms are so similar, that would be because the clubroom is filled with all of our stuff... *at least, that's our excuse*.

"Wonder when Rika's gonna get here~"

Sena said in an excited tone of voice, and right as she did, a ding~♪ sound rang out from inside Yozora's bag.

"Mu... It's from Rika."

...That ding all of a sudden startled me a bit there.

"Huh? How do you know it's from Rika without even checking it?" asked Sena, to which Yozora replied,

"Because there's only one person who knows my number and isn't in this room."

She then took the phone out of her bag, and checked Rika's message.

"...Umm..... It'll take me a few more hours to finish editing, so please have everyone go home for today. I'll be sure to have an o... orgasmic movie ready for you all tomorrow, so look forward to it heart music note star heart music note star... is what she wrote."

Yozora diligently read out exactly what Rika had written in her message with a bright red face.

"Ehhh~" groaned Sena.

"...Hrm... A few hours, huh..... I suppose we *could* wait here for her..."

Yozora murmured with a pensive expression on her face.

"...Nah, we'd have to turn in a request form for that. Let's just go home for today like she said," I replied.

"Hmm... maybe we could help her out or-, huahh~..."

Sena seemed reluctant to leave as well, but she quickly went quiet and started to blush after letting out a small yawn mid-sentence.

Guess it only makes sense she'd be tired after running around as much as she did today.

"...There's nothing we can help with even if we stay anyway, and besides, I'm sure Rika can handle it."

".....Hmph... I guess you're right."

"Yeah..."

"Ms. Rika is indeed a capable one."

Yozora, Sena, and Yukimura all seemed to agree with me.

...Thus, we all decided to go home.

I passed through the school gates while casting a sidelong glance at the track where several people were busily cleaning up the athletics festival equipment.

Good, now I don't have to talk to Rika today——

...All while pretending to not feel relieved by the above.

King Lear and The Fool

It was now the next day, the day of the cultural festival.

Kobato and I came to school a bit earlier than usual, and were greeted by a fully decorated school gate and a campus full of posters and signs.

There were already tons of students bustling about getting ready, and the food stands were filling the air with a sweet smell.

"Kukuku... Oh clansman of mine... You are to present me with a sacrifice... *slurp*..."

Kobato licked her lips as we walked through the campus holding hands. How much of a glutton are you for crying out loud. ..

"You literally just ate breakfast, and the stands aren't even open yet anyway."

"Kukuku... Who cares, you can just take it by force then..."

"...You want me to make my reputation even worse than it already is?"

"How foolish... Pay no heed to what those lowly humans think and do as you please..."

"That'd never work for me. Only you could get away with that... **Princess Kobato**."

"A-A-A-A-A-A-An-chan!!"

Kobato got all flustered as her face went bright red in response to my teasing.

She then took a few deep breaths, and said,

"...Ku, Kukukuku... D-do not call me by that abominable name ever again... I am Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi, Queen of the Exalted Night... I am not a princess or anything of the sort..."

"Whatever you say, Princess Kobato."

"Fngaaahh!!"

I rubbed Kobato's head as she pouted due to my teasing.

She usually acts pretty weird, to say the least, but apparently she's really popular over at the middle school division.

She's so popular that not only do they treat her like a princess, but her class even made what was essentially a Kobato promotion video for their cultural festival.

We're supposed to be brother and sister here, so how did we end up so different?

I mulled over that question as we left the row of food stands in the front courtyard and walked into the chapel.

I read that there'd be groups besides us using the chapel today, but most of them were simple displays that didn't require anyone to come in early and set things up.

Hence, the chapel was as calm as ever, much unlike the lively areas around the main school building and the track.

I felt a bit relieved by that, and then made a faint wry smile.

Can't believe I like this quiet place more than the lively festival outside. It's like I'm an old geezer or something.

"An-chan?"

"It's nothing."

I said to Kobato, who had a confused look on her face, before heading over towards lounge room #4.

"Yo~"

"Ah, hey Kodaka. Hi Kobato-chan!!"

Sena quickly made a big fat smile on her face the moment we entered the room.

There were four other Neighbors Club members in the room.

Sena, Yozora, Yukimura, and our advisor, Maria.

...Rika was the only one not here.

"Where's Rika?"

"Not here yet."

Yozora answered with a hint of worry mixed into her usual sullen expression.

"Still? What about the movie?"

Yozora shook her head.

The reason we all came here so early, was, of course, so we could all watch the finished movie together before the cultural festival, but...

We all felt a bit uneasy, but in the end we decided to just wait for Rika.

Yozora wasn't reading a book, and Sena wasn't even playing a video game. They were both simply sitting in silence on the couch.

However, even after all our waiting, Rika had yet to show up, despite it being only 30 minutes until the start of the festival.

Yozora sent several texts to her, but didn't get a single response.

"The festival's gonna start pretty soon now..."

Yozora's worried tone of voice spurred me into action as I stood up from my chair.

"Kodaka?"

"...I'll be right back."

That was all I said before leaving the clubroom.

My destination was none other than the Rika room.

It was just a hunch, but I got the feeling that that was where she was.

I entered the Rika room, located on the second floor of the special classrooms building, and then walked up to the door to the Rika Prep Room with a nameplate on it that read "Sect Σ".

You need a card key to open this door, so I tried knocking to see if she was there.

"Hey~ Rika?"

.....No response.

I tried calling out several times after that, but the result was the same.

I then decided to try jiggling the doorknob to see if it'd open, and to my surprise it opened quite easily.

"Uoh!?"

...She should really be more careful... What's the point of needing a keycard if you leave it unlocked?

"I'm coming in..."

I slowly opened the door, and entered the room.

Rika Shiguma was indeed inside the room.

...To be specific, she was out cold on the floor.

My heart started beating so fast I thought it might explode.

"Rikaaa!!!"

I let out a huge yell, or perhaps a scream, and rushed over to Rika.

"Hey! Wake up!"

She was lying face down, so I first turned her over before helping her sit up.

As I did,

".....Ah... Sen... pai..."

Rika said in a frail voice, her eyes barely even open.

"H-hey, are you OK!?"

Rika then made an awkward, weak smile on her face in response to my question, and said,

"...Sorry... The movie still isn't... done... I'm almost finished though, so... just wait..."

"Like that even matters right now! I'm taking you to the nurse's office!"

I ignored her ridiculous request, and picked her up in my arms without any intention of putting her down again before I got to the nurse's office.

"Aha... Senpai's carrying me like a princess... It's like a dream come true..."

"This is the second time, idiot."

"Huh?"

"Been about 130 days since the first time, if I remember right."

I carried Rika to the nurse's office just like I was doing now on the first day I met her.

Rika seemed to get what I meant, and said,

"Aha... So I got to be your princess back then, too...? Too bad I was asleep..."

Rika then made a wry smile, and closed her eyes.

"Damn it...! Hey! Get out of my way!"

I yelled at the students giving me weird looks and cleared a path through them as I ran as fast as I could to the nurse's office.

"It was just a cold."

I explained what had happened to the other club members in the clubroom.

I had the nurse take a look at Rika after bringing her there, but it turned out that she just had a cold.

The nurse said it was probably due to lack of sleep.

"Geez, making us worry like that."

Sena said along with a breath of relief.

The other club members seemed to be relieved as well.

"...I think... We might've been relying on her too much," Yozora said in a quiet voice.

"Yeah..."

We shouldn't have made Rika do all the editing work by herself.

It's true that there wasn't really anything any of us could help with, given how much better than us Rika is with computers. In fact, we probably would've only gotten in her way.

...But, even so... Even if we couldn't have helped with the editing itself, couldn't we have helped in a different way?

.....No, that's not quite right either.

Even if we were just in her way... Even if us helping only made things less efficient and led to a worse movie, we still should've worked on it together, rather than leave it all up to Rika.

After all, this isn't just any movie, it's the Neighbors Club's movie.

Isn't there something we should've cared about more than just finishing it?

At all the other cultural festivals I've been a part of, at best I got some random job that I did like a machine. This was the first time I'd ever been one of the main members working on a project, so... I never even thought about that until now.

"...But, we don't have time to worry about that stuff right now."

Yozora coolly said along with a light sigh.

"What...?"

There was a slight tinge of anger in my voice at Yozora's cold declaration.

Yozora went "Hmph." at me in response, and said,

"We need to get to work asap. Worrying comes after that."

"Get to work?"

Rika did say she was almost done, so maybe Yozora's saying we should finish it up?

"The movie is canceled. We need to go tear down the posters we made."

"Canceled!?"

I was completely taken by surprise, but Sena seemed relatively calm as she gave me a sidelong glance and stood up.

"Haa... What a waste."

"There's nothing we can do about it."

Yozora then added in a faint voice,

"...There's no point if we don't all watch it together first."

...I could feel my chest heating up all of a sudden after hearing her say that.

Neither Sena, nor Yukimura, nor Kobato, nor Maria objected to what Yozora had said, so we all stood up with looks of resignation on our faces.

First, we took down the plain, boring poster hung outside Lounge #2 that had nothing but the words "Neighbors Club Movie Screening" and the movie time on it, and replaced it with a piece of paper that said "The Neighbors Club's move screening has been canceled."

We then split up and went around the school taking down the posters we'd put up.

However, as I was taking down a poster down from the bulletin board on the second floor of special classrooms building,

"'Ey you!!"

A loud, almost lispy-sounding voice echoed throughout the hallway.

Upon turning around, I saw a familiar girl making a pitter patter sound as she quickly walked over to me.

She was a small girl with spiky reddish hair that made her resemble a baby wolf.

She had a yellow armband that read "STAFF" on her arm as well.

She looked up at me with her big eyes once she'd made it over to me, and in a harsh tone of voice, said,

"Please don't play with the bulletin board! ...Wait, huh?"

The girl gave me a blank stare after realizing who I was.

"Yo. You're... Yusa, right?"

"Yes!"

This girl's name is Aoi Yusa.

She's in the same grade as me, and in the same class as Sena as well.

She's also a perfectly admirable honor student who always gets 2nd place on every test, and even works as the treasurer for the student council, but apparently she sees Sena, who always gets first place on every test, as her rival

"Your name is, umm-"

"Kodaka Hasegawa."

I just realized I never told her my name when we met before.

"Hasegawa! Please don't play with the bulletin board!"

"I'm not playing with it. Our club had to cancel our event for the cultural festival, so I'm going around taking the posters down."

"I see, so that's what it was! My apologies! I should've known a person like you would never cause problems for others! Forgive my ignorance!"

She just believed what I said and didn't doubt me at all...

She's a good person...

"Eh? Why're you shaking? Are you cold?"

Yusa asked, her head tilted.

"No, I was just moved, that's all... Most people don't believe me even after I explain things, heck they usually run before I even get to explain..."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, but I'm sure you're a very sensitive person! Fggh... I can't believe you're sensitive on top of

being stylish and having a good sense of humor. You really are a perfect superhuman fit to be Sena Kashiwazaki's boyfriend! Khh~! I'm so jealous!"

"I told you, I'm not her boyfriend!"

I made sure to emphasize that to put an end to Yusa's crazy misunderstanding.

"Eh!? You're not her boyfriend!?"

Yusa asked, her eyes open wide and her head tilted to the side.

"I'm not. ...She's just a fellow club member."

"I see, so you're not her boyfriend... Wait, you're in a club together!?"

For some reason Yusa seemed more shocked about us being fellow club members than she did about me not being her boyfriend.

"Is it really that surprising?"

"Yes! As far as I know, Sena Kashiwazaki is not a part of a club!"

"We just made the club this June."

"You did!? I can't believe it..."

Yusa opened her eyes wide in shock.

"...Is it really that weird?"

"Yes! I told Sena Kashiwazaki back in April that she should join a club and put her abilities to good use, but all she said was "There aren't any I really like." and completely turned me down! Fggh...!"

"Yeah, that sounds like something Sena'd say."

She gets freakishly obsessed about stuff she likes, but couldn't care less about anything else...

"Just what kind of club did Sena Kashiwazaki join then...?"

Yusa then looked over at the poster I'd been trying to take down before, and said,

"...The Neighbors Club...?"

She made a confused look on her face.

"Yep."

"The Neighbors Club... I've never heard of it before. I was sure I'd memorized the names of all the school's clubs too."

"Wow, all of them?"

"Yes. I was searching for a club where I could do the most good, in order to improve myself, and ended up joining the student council."

"In order to improve yourself, huh. Pretty cool..."

Her reason for joining the student council was like blindingly bright light compared to my reason for joining the Neighbors Club .

"No no, it's nothing special."

Yusa happily grinned like a little puppy.

"Well, like I said it *was* just made this June. You looked over the clubs before that, right?"

"Yes, that's exactly right! I didn't think to check for any new clubs after the start of the year! As I'd expect from one of Sena Kashiwazaki's fellow club members, your insight is truly splendid! "

"...Does being in a club with Sena have anything to do with how insightful someone is?"

I remarked, but Yusa ignored it, and asked,

"By the way, what does the Neighbors Club do?"

"Eh..."

I was at a loss for words.

The goal of the Neighbors Club is basically "to make friends", but we don't have any specific activities, and generally just kill time doing whatever we want. It's kinda hard to explain that to someone else...

...I'm pretty sure Yozora came up with some authentic sounding fake description when she made the club though, maybe I can fool her with that.

"Ummm..."

What was it... I can't really remember because of how ridiculous it was...

Let's see, I think it went like,

"The Neighbors Club is..."

"The Neighbors Club is?"

"Uses... No, follows(?) Christian teachings, and..."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!"

"Basically, it's like, with Neighbors you see..."

"Yeah!?"

"W-with our Neighbors, we...?"

"Yes!?"

...Shit, I can't remember it at all.

"Simply put, we strive to,"

"You strive to!?"

Yusa's innocent and sparkling gaze was making this really awkward.

"We strive to be able to... adapt to a variety of situations with our neighbors."

Yeah, I'm pretty sure Yozora had something about adapting or whatever in there.

"Ohh!? And what kind of situations do you want to adapt to specifically!?"

I have no idea what to say now.

"...Umm.....L-love situations?"

"Love!?"

I just kind of came up with it on the spot since the phrase " neighborly love" came to mind, but "adapt to love situations"? I know I'm the one who said it, but seriously, what does that even mean?

"!? So what does that mean exactly!?"

Figures she'd ask about it if even I don't know what it means.

"B-basically the Neighbors Club studies love... in various situations..."

"You study love!?"

"Y-yeah..."

I averted my eyes from Yusa as a cold sweat ran down my face.

"So how do you study love!?"

"Eh..... Uh... Um... I'm not too sure yet..."

I seriously have no idea (about studying and what I'm saying), so I just crossed my arms and answered her with a serious face.

Surprisingly though, in response Yusa simply made a meek expression on her face, and said,

"I see..... I should've known... It's quite a profound topic after all ..."

"...?"

I have no idea why she "should've known" that, but whatever.

"...Pardon my silly question... This is a subject a sage as wise as yourself must dedicate his entire body and soul to in order to understand... There's no way I'd ever be able to grasp it simply by asking you about it."

It appears I'm a sage now.

"...The pursuit of love... so profound... I can't believe Sena Kashiwazaki is off studying such a deep topic while all I do is

spend my days training in the morning, studying at night, doing student council work during the week, and volunteering on the weekends... She's on a whole different level from me now... I don't think I'll ever reach her..."

"W-well, you might be closer than you think. Haha..."

I made a dry laugh to try and cheer Yusa up (she's way too good of a person... is she a saint or something...?).

"So yeah, anyway I've gotta go. Good luck."

"Ah, thank you! Good luck to you too in your pursuit of love!"

"Wha...!?"

Don't say weird shit like that so loud!!

I quickly tore down the poster while holding back my desire to yell at Yusa, who was staring at me full of admiration, before turning my back to her and going on my way.

Somehow we managed to get all the posters taken down before the start of the festival.

We then told the festival staff that our movie was canceled, and that was it.

Our project for the festival was over.

It sucks that it ended before we were even able to get started, but I guess that's life.

Shortly after, an announcement announcing the start of the festival played over the P.A. system.

As the rest of the school was running around full of energy, we simply sat in our clubroom doing nothing in particular.

Yozora started reading like usual before long, Yukimura entered her default spaced-out state, and Maria started eating some potato chips.

"Hey~ Hey~ Kobato-chan, wanna go walk around the festival with me?"

"No!!"

Kobato was running away as fast as she could from Sena's stream of bribes.

"I'll buy you some yakisoba, some takoyaki, and some crepes too, so come on~♥ Let's go try out a bunch of crepes♥"

"Fungyahh!!"

"Crepes!? Ooh, ooh, Sena! I want crepes too!"

"Uh-huh."

"(´･`)"

Maria got hooked by Sena's bribes and raised her hand full of energy in an attempt to get her attention, but Sena ignored her without a second thought.

"Uuu~ H-help me, oh clansman of mine..."

Kobato came over to me for help and hid behind my back.

"...Sena, give it a rest, will ya?"

I said along with a sigh.

"What? Don't get in my way, Kodaka. Oh, I know... D-do you wanna come too? Since you're here and all. I can make an exception... and hang out at the festival with you if you want."

Sena said with a faint shade of red to her cheeks.

"...Maybe a bit later, I've got stuff to do."

I then got up and left the clubroom.

My destination was the nurse's office.

There was a placard on the door that read "The nurse is away right now♥", but I still said "Excuse me." as I walked into the room .

There was nobody else inside.

I faced towards the bed Rika was probably still in, and called out to her on the other side of the curtains in a quiet voice.

"...You awake?"

I'd planned on just leaving if she was still asleep, but

"I'm awake~"

She responded to me, albeit sounding a bit weak.

"...Is it just you, Kodaka-senpai?"

"Yep."

"Oh, so you're here for a quickie? Then come on in!"

Her typical stupid banter had a certain listlessness to it.

"No, idiot. ...Go back to sleep if you're still tired."

"I'm fine, so come on, come in here and talk to me for a little bit.
"

I let out a brief sigh, opened the curtains as Rika had asked.

"...!"

I was struck speechless.

Rika sat herself up, and looked at me with a slightly flushed face.

Her usual lab coat and uniform were on a hanger next to the bed, and the only thing she had on was a white blouse.

Even her hair, which had been tied up in a ponytail when I found her in the Rika room, was now undone and casually dangling behind her.

Simply put, the girl sitting before me was beautiful.

Simply put, the girl sitting
before me was beautiful.

保健室にて

"What's the matter?"

Rika tilted her head, confused as to why I'd gone stiff all of a sudden. Even her attitude and gentle voice was beautiful.

"...You should have a cold all the time."

"Did you come here just to insult me or something!?"

"I-I was just kidding! Sorry."

Rika seemed pretty upset, and even I think that was a bit harsh, so I apologized.

I took a seat in a chair sitting next to her bed, and asked her,

"...So, are you really okay?"

"Yes. I'm doing much better now, thanks to you."

Rika said with a smile.

She's definitely not anywhere near as pale as she was when I found her on the floor, so she probably is feeling better.

"I see, that's good to hear."

"Rika can't believe herself though... Rika should've been more prepared for this..."

"It's 'cause you were up on the roof in the cold wind wearing that crazy outfit, idiot."

I lightly replied to Rika, whose expression had started to cloud over, causing her to purse her lips irritatedly.

"Muu~ I'll admit it was cold up on the roof wearing those bloomers, but... It's partly your fault for making me spend an hour up there lost in thought after you left."

"Ah, well... Yeah..."

I fumbled over my words only to give a vague response.

"....."

"....."

We sat in silence for a short while, and then,

"...Yozora-senpai sent me a text. Apparently you guys canceled the movie."

"Yeah."

I nodded, after which Rika gave me a scornful look.

"Hahh, I was almost done too. If only *somebody* would've just let me finish it..."

"And what if you fainted again, huh? Idiot."

"Then you could just show a 95% complete version or something..."

"That still wouldn't be good enough, idiot."

"...You can quit calling me an idiot now."

"Sorry."

I gave a quick apology, and then... told Rika what she probably hadn't told her.

"She said there's no point if the seven of us don't all watch it together first... Yozora did, that is."

Rika looked positively astonished.

"Yozora-senpai said that?"

"Yep. ...I... **We** all felt the same way, too."

"...Muu... I can't believe *the* Yozora-senpai actually said that..."

"Yep, and this is *the* Yozora we're talking about."

"Mumu."

Rika bunched up her lips, and then quickly turned away from me.

I could see that the tips of her ears sticking out ever so slightly from her long hair had turned red.

"Oh? Are you so moved that you're crying?"

"I-I-I-I'm not crying!"

Rika got completely flustered after my little teasing.

While thinking to myself how charming that side of her is,

"...'Cause I almost started crying myself, ya' know."

I told her the truth.

"....."

Rika stayed silent, still facing away from me.

"...I'm sure you already know why Yozora made the Neighbors Club, right?"

"Of course."

Rika casually answered in the affirmative.

I doubt Yozora would ever admit it if you asked her, but...

The reason why a socially inept person like her would do something as social as making a club after realizing that I was her long lost best friend...

The thing that motivated her to go so far...

Was so that she could become friends with me—— No, with *Taka*, again.

Simply put, *she wanted to return to how things were 10 years ago*.

But, that same Yozora who was so attached to the past now treasures all of the members of the Neighbors Club as well—— and she isn't the only one.

It's not like there was any big miracle that caused this to happen either. We only happened to meet each other thanks to a series of lucky coincidences, but before we knew it, the Neighbors Club had become an incredibly special place to us.

"...Which is why... We've gotta take care of it."

I mumbled as though talking to myself, to which Rika said nothing, and instead *pretended* to let out a big yawn.

"Fuahh~ I'm kinda sleepy now."

She said with a smile while wiping her eyes dry.

"Hehe, Kodaka-senpai, if you're gonna have your way with Rika then now's your chance. Just like in an ero doujin!"

She then laid down on the bed and started giggling at me.

I let out a sigh at how she can make those dirty jokes even at a time like this, and told her,

"You know... You always say that kinda stuff, but seriously, what would you do... if I like, actually tried to h-have my way(?) with you...?"

It makes sense that you'd have a lower opinion of yourself when you're constantly around girls like Sena, and Yozora, and Yukimura, but you know, you're a lot cuter than you probably think you are.

...I decided to keep that extra part to myself.

"Aha, I guess I wouldn't be able to do anything then~ Rika couldn't possibly overpower a man if he was holding her down."

Rika then made an impish smile, and added,

"But you'd never do that anyway, would you, Kodaka-senpai?"

It was like she'd seen right through me.

".....Well, yeah. I wouldn't."

"Hehe."

Rika, the girl who loves to tell dirty jokes, but actually has her guard up more than anyone else in the Neighbors Club when it comes to that kind of stuff, laughed in triumph at my sullen reply.

"By the way, Kodaka-senpai."

"Hm?"

"Since you came all the way out to see me, would you mind reading me a bed-time story?"

"...I guess."

...She *is* technically still sick... I suppose this is the least I can do for her.

Kobato used to have me read her books when she was sick, too.

Rika happily thrust her hand under her pillow upon seeing me nod, and pulled out a paperback book.

"Please read this."

"!? Why'd you have this under your pillow!?"

"Heheheh, I figured something like this might happen one day, so I kept it in my lab coat."

"...You sure are prepared."

I then took the book from Rika, amazed at how crazy she can be sometimes.

.....There were two naked men with sparkling eyes holding each other on the cover.

The title of the book was *The Wild Biology Teacher's Private Lesson*.

"The hell, a BL novel!!?"

"Yes, it's a relatively tame rape fantasy, so it's perfect for a bed-time story."

"You read rape fantasies as bed-time stories!?"

This girl is nuts...

"Come on~ Read it for me~ Kodaka-senpai~"

Rika started begging for me to read it like a child.

"——*Something like this is just right*."

I let out a sigh as Rika thinned her eyes and smiled at me.

.....She really is a considerate person.

Back when we were on the roof, Rika told me,

...——If that's what you want, Kodaka-senpai, then Rika will continue acting like she has been——...

In other words, Rika was doing this for me.

It's her way of making it clear to me that she'll keep on acting the same way she always has, that she won't change how she interacts with me, so long as I wish for it.

...Never knew BL could be so handy.

It works like a strong filter for her, hiding her true kind self behind her pervert fujoshi mask.

It's no different than any other hobby either, like liking rock-and-roll, or soccer, or some actor. However, simply because *it isn't normal*, it warps the way people view her entire character, almost like a curse.

It's not just BL either, eroge, anime, light novels, music, idols, fashion, family, appearances, habits, special skills, a subject you're good at, a subject you're bad at, the kind of guy or girl you like, your boyfriend or girlfriend, your friends... almost anything can become a curse.

Who gives a shit what normal is, anyway?

Everybody has their own special thing they like, you damn idiots.

You don't have to understand that thing.

And you don't have to try and force yourself to accept it by saying "everybody has their own tastes" or something either.

Just please, all I ask is that you don't deny someone what's special to them.

"You really are a damn rotten pervert. I swear, you don't make any goddamn sense."

I said, insulting her while thanking her for her consideration from the bottom of my heart.

Rika simply smiled back at me.

However, there's not a single person on this planet who enjoys having the things they like mocked.

The only kinda person who'd enjoy being called a damn rotten pervert would have to be a masochist.

"...But, well, I guess I can make an exception and read your stupid book for you today, you pervert fujoshi."

She's sacrificing the things she loves, all just to be nice to someone like me, and that kindness of hers is so heartrending that —— the least I can do is let her enjoy it.

"Thank you very much!"

"...Should I start from page one?"

"From the bookmarked page, if you would be so kind!"

I opened up to the bookmarked page, as requested.

Upon doing so, an illustration of a bespectacled man wearing nothing but a lab coat over his naked body pushing a younger boy up against a blackboard flew into my vision.

".....Ehhhh..."

...I have to read this?

...Really?

The impact from the illustration nearly blew me away, but somehow I managed to stand my ground and begin reading.

"...Ahh..... Heh... **Heh heh heh, you know, Oosawa** t-**that's quite the lustful expression you've got there. Do you want my** m.. **meat stick** t-**that badly?**"

"Put some feeling into it! Become the sadistic biology teacher!"

Rika quickly instructed me on how to read the lines, much like Yozora did when she made Sena read her eroge out loud.

"Uu... **L-like hell I do! Get the fuck away from me!**"

I thought I read that line pretty well, but contrary to my expectations,

"No, no, no! Oosawa is secretly a masochist, and isn't actually refusing him here! He's been thoroughly trained after spending many steamy nights together with Aoyama-sensei, and in his head he's actually thinking 'I can't wait to see what he'll do to me today~ ', but he's too embarrassed to actually say that, thus he only tried refusing him to hide that fact!"

"H-how the hell am I supposed to know that!? And even if I did, you think an amateur like me could give a performance that nuanced!?"

"Muu... What a let down... You even have a good voice like that voice actor, Kouhei Kimura, too..."

"Deal with it, idiot."

I complained, and then continued reading.

"...**Now then, I think I'll teach you some astrology today.** Umm , **said Aoyama, while running the pointer in his right hand along Oosawa's Orion.** ...Orion? Whatever.....**S-stop itt~ said Oosawa, allowing a sweet moan of pleasure to escape his lips.** Phew... A-**Aoyama then deepened the sadistic smile on his face as he took his left hand and grabbed Oosawa's**, Oosawa's..."

"Oosawa's what!?"

"Oosawa's... c-**crotch**..... **Sensei, p-please, let go of me**.... **Oh, what's this? What happened to all your energy from before? You say you want me to let go, but it's clear your little bunny can barely contain itself as it eagerly awaits my big tiger.**"

"Haa, Haa, Haa...!"

"H-hey, Rika, you're hyperventilating."

"I'm fine, just keep reading!"

"F-fine... Umm, D-**do you really want me to let go? Or do you actually want me to** p-**put it in you?** Uu... **Oosawa's entire face up to the tips of his ears went red with embarrassment. Aoyama then lightly nibbled on the embarrassed Oosawa's earlobes**... **A-aha~ went Oosawa as h-**"

"NO NO NOOOOOOO!!"

Rika interrupted my reading with a loud yell.

"W-what!?"

"What kinda shitty monotone voice was that, you ham actor!! Are you doing this stupid shit on purpose!? Think how Oosawa feels right now! Remember a time when you had someone nibble on *your* ears!"

"So sorry, but nobody's ever done that to me!!"

"Fine, then I'll just do it to you myself! Right here, right now!!"

Rika's eyes were bloodshot as she sat herself up and then leaned over towards my face all of a sudden.

"Uoh!?"

"!! Ah!?"

Our faces were no more than a few centimeters when Rika suddenly stopped, the instant after which her face went completely red all the way up to her ears.

"Hau!"

She quickly backed away from me, and laid back down in bed with her face turned away in the opposite direction.

"......I'm sorry, I got a little too excited."

Rika shyly mumbled to me.

"I-it's cool..."

...That was close... My heart's about to jump out of my chest.

"...Ah, um... I-I guess you really do like BL then, huh."

"O-of course I do. I wouldn't act like this just for show."

The way Rika hung her head in embarrassment was honestly one of the cutest things I've ever seen.

I managed to stop myself from being captivated by her though, and continued reading.

"...Umm, I-I'm gonna keep reading then. ...**Aha~ went Oosawa as he let out yet another sweet moan.** ...**Heheheh, perhaps I'll be a bit more gentle today.** ...**Or so Aoyama said, but the next moment he** v-**violently grabbed hold of Oosawa's waist, and plunged his raging wild tiger into Oosawa's** ...y-**yaoi-hole**...? **with a ferocious vigor.**..."

...Something about that last line bugged me so much I had to pause my reading.

"...Hey Rika."

"Yes?"

"...I can pretty much tell that 'tiger' is supposed to be a metaphor for his you-know-what, but..."

"Kukuku, his you-know-what? What's that? You'll have to be more specific for me."

"Can it! This isn't a scene in one of your stupid eroge!"

"Boo..."

"Sheesh..."

I said, and then continued my question,

"...So anyway... what's this 'yaoi hole' supposed to be?"

"Huh? A yaoi hole is a yaoi hole."

Rika tilted her head in confusion at me.

"...No, that's what I'm asking. What the heck is a yaoi hole?"

"Huh? You're a guy, how can you not know? The yaoi hole is an organ used when two men wish to consummate their love."

Rika explained, as though what she was saying were common sense.

...Hrmm... Scarily enough, she doesn't seem to be joking either...

"......Just so we're clear, this 'yaoi hole' isn't a guy's butt hole, right?"

"Of course it's not. An ass is an ass, and a yaoi hole is a yaoi hole ."

I tilted my head at Rika, who nodded in response to my question with a serious look on her face.

"...Umm... So are they like, hermaphrodites then?"

"They are not futanaris!!"

Rika screamed at the top of her lungs, her eyes wide open.

"Listen up, the yaoi hole is not a sexual organ, it is simply an organ used by men when they wish to confirm their love for each other!! It's completely different from being a futanari!!"

"A-alright already, chill out..."

She honestly scared me a bit there.

"Not that there's anything wrong with futanari though!"

"You're into everything, aren't you..."

"I'm not into everything, just the things I'm into."

I was stunned at how Rika said that with a smug look on her face, but I managed to ignore it before clearing my throat, and telling her,

"Anyway... no such organ exists."

"......? ?"

Rika made a face that seemed to say "What the heck are you talking about? (˚)"

"That yaoi hole of yours... it doesn't exist."

I tried telling her again.

I can't believe I'm actually seriously explaining this right now... is what I wanted to say, but I kept it to myself.

".....So the yaoi hole... doesn't exist?"

"No, it doesn't. I can't believe you thought it did."

"B-but Rika reads about it all the time in her books!!"

"What, seriously...? So in the BL-universe guys have a made-up organ? Kinda amazing actually."

"I-it's all made-up...?"

Rika looked utterly stupefied by this new revelation.

"...W-well, it's true that it only shows up in certain works, and I've never seen one on any other animal before, so it's not like I never suspected that it might not exist, but..."

"Seriously, how could you ever even think it was real?"

I retorted, causing Rika's face to go a bright shade of red as she yelled back,

"W-well sorry for not knowing! I'd never been interested in real human bodies until recently, and the only naked man I've ever seen before outside of my books is my dad back when I was a baby , and they always put mosaics over those parts too, so of course I wouldn't know what it really looks like in detail!!"

"...Still, biologically it doesn't make any sense for it to exist."

"Well, yeah, you're right, but... Hahh, I suppose I let the fleeting hope that "it might really exist♥" cloud my genius-level intellect..."

Said the embarrassed genius girl before me as she tried to make excuses for herself.

...I still can't believe she thought that thing was real though, given how often she brings up sex and stuff. Talk about superficial knowledge...

"...I didn't have any friends to correct me either."

Rika added in a barely-audible voice.

"...Yeah, I guess you can't help that one."

I said, agreeing with her almost reflexively.

After all, I know what she means about not realizing something until someone points it out to you quite well myself.

For example, I never even really thought about how I roll up my pants leg until Yusa pointed it out to me.

...Ever since then, I realized that wearing my pants like that was probably making me stick out more than anything, so lately I've just been wearing them normally.

Anyway, that aside,

"...I see... so guys don't have a yaoi hole..."

Rika whispered with a strangely girly look on her face.

"Oi."

I interrupted what I assumed to be her impression of Yozora from some time ago. I don't need to see her crappy parodies.

"...Sheesh, you're such a pain... But, well, at least you know now."

Rika then said, "I guess so..." along with a wry smile before making a frown all of a sudden, and adding,

"...Still, this is a bit of a problem..."

"? What's a problem?"

"Do you remember how we all went to Yokoshima Wonderland together before?"

"Yeah."

That's the amusement park we went to since Sena's dad gave her tickets to go there, and afterwards we went to the hot springs they had there too.

"And do you remember how Rika gave Yukimura a little sex-ed lecture back then too?"

"...Yeah, I remember it."

I found out Yukimura was a girl at the spas there, but she wouldn't listen to me no matter how I explained it to her, so I had to have Rika make her accept the fact that she's a girl.

I don't know exactly what Rika told her in their little sex-ed lecture though...

"...Wait, you don't mean-"

A cold sweat ran down Rika's cheek.

"...Haha, yeah... Rika really hammered that into her... About how guys all have a yaoi hole... I told her she didn't have one, which meant she had to be a girl..."

"...I can't believe this..."

"Tehepero (･<)"

"'Tehepero' my ass you idiot!"

Rika made a dejected look on her face after I yelled at her, and smiled weakly as she said,

"...What should I do..."

"...Hrmm... Can't you just apologize to her and tell her yaoi holes don't really exist?"

"...I wonder if Yukimura will believe me."

"Uu..." I couldn't say anything back to that.

Correcting Yukimura once she's convinced of something is probably one of the most difficult things you can do.

"...Oh, I know! I'm sure she'll understand if we show her the real thing!"

"The real thing?"

"We can show her a real man's naked body, and how there's no yaoi hole on it."

"I'm not getting naked."

I cut her off before she could even suggest what she was thinking.

"Ehh~ But you'd be perfect for it, Kodaka-senpai!"

"I don't give a damn, I'm not getting naked for something so stupid!"

"...Does the yaoi hole *really* not exist? Are you sure you're not just trying to trick Rika? Would you mind getting naked and letting Rika confirm it for herself, young man? Guhihi..."

"Quiet moron!"

"Ow!"

The sparkle in Rika's eyes was getting so dangerous that I ended up smacking her on the head by reflex.

"Geez... I'm still sick you know, Senpai..."

"If you're sick then go back to sleep, idiot. I'm going now."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say~"

Rika said as if she were pouting, and then pulled up the covers over her entire head.

I got up from the chair, and turned my back to her.

"...Being able to goof around with you like this is thanks to the Neighbors Club too, isn't it? Do you think I'm wrong for wanting to protect that?"

She must've heard me, but she didn't say anything back, so I simply continued on my way and left the nurse's office.

After leaving the nurse's office and returning to the clubroom, I told the rest of the club members how Rika was doing.

Basically, I told them that she was—— *back to normal*.

Everyone was happy to hear the good news.

Afterwards Sena, Kobato, Maria, Yukimura and I left the crowd-hater Yozora behind, and went around buying a bunch of food from the various food stands, and then brought it all back to the clubroom to eat together.

We bought some chocolate bananas and stuff for Rika too, but we later realized that food wasn't allowed in the nurse's office, so we ended up eating all that too.

Around lunchtime Rika sent us a text that read, "I feel fine walking around now, so I'll be going home for the day." After reading the text I went to the Rika room to make sure she really

did go home this time, and sure enough, when I got there the room was empty. I guess she wasn't lying about going home after all then.

After we'd all had our fill on the food we got, we decided to call it a day and head home too, since everyone was free to come and go to school as they pleased during the festival.

...And thus ended our first day of the cultural festival.

Turning Their Backs on the Light

It was now the next day, Sunday.

Today was the second day of the cultural festival, and also the last day of the entire school festival.

We'd only planned to play our movie for one day, so we didn't have anything in particular to do today.

Lounge #2 was occupied by another group today as well (apparently they're doing a puppet show), so we couldn't show our movie today even if we wanted to.

"Kobato, you going to the festival today?"

I asked Kobato, who had gotten up late and was currently sleepily nibbling at her breakfast.

"...Nn... No..."

She replied, in a voice that sounded like she was still half-asleep .

Thus, I decided to stay home today too.

After sending out a text letting everyone know Kobato and I wouldn't be coming today, Sena sent a reply that read, "If Kobato-chan's not going then neither am I."

Yozora already told us she wouldn't be going today, and all she had to say in reply was, "Okay."

Yukimura, on the other hand, sent a polite reply that read, "I must attend school today to assist my class with our project, but please enjoy your day off, Aniki."

Rika also sent a reply, but all it said was "b" in the title.

"b...?"

I didn't know what she meant, so I sent a text that read, "?" to her, and in reply she sent me back a text that said, "It's supposed to be someone giving you a thumbs-up, b"

"O-Ohhh, I get it...!"

I spontaneously let out a gasp in awe, and then sent another text to her that only had "b" in the title while staring at my left hand making a thumbs-up.

After that I went back to sleep until noon, and then made some fried rice for lunch when I got up.

After eating my slightly late lunch, I flopped back down in bed and read a book until I got sleepy again.

As I was lazily moving my eyes along the pages, I got a good scare when my cell phone sitting on my desk made a loud beeping noise all of a sudden.

"Wha...!?"

I checked the display, and saw it was from Rika.

I then read her message and couldn't help but let out another small yell after doing so.

To everyone: The movie is done, please come to the clubroom.
"

I woke up Kobato, who'd been sleeping on the couch with her stomach sticking out, got ready to leave, then rode the train and bus out to St. Chronica Academy. By the time we got there it was about 5 p.m.—— roughly an hour after the festival had ended at 4 p.m.

The sun was already setting, and all the stands were closed, but the lively atmosphere of the festival hadn't left the school just yet.

Out in the middle of the track was a bunch of firewood stacked up like an altar with a bunch of people gathered around it.

I'm not sure if it's because this school has a lot traditions or what, but apparently they were having a campfire dance to celebrate the end of the school festival, something you don't see very often nowadays.

The celebration began right as we got there, and as it did, a girl wearing an all-white outfit that looked like something a goddess or an ancient Greek person would wear (I looked it up later, and apparently it's called a himation) appeared near the end of the track.

It was the student council president, Hinata Hidaka.

She was holding a torch in one hand as well.

A dignified song then started playing in the background, followed by Aoi Yusa, who was wearing the same thing as the president, pitter-pattering her way in front of the president and lighting the torch.

The tip of the torch gave off a faint orange glow, lighting the area around it.

A bit of a commotion then broke out among everyone watching in awe, but they quickly became silent again.

The student council president raised the torch above her head, and slowly walked towards the center of the track.

Her naturally refined looks combined with her outfit gave her a certain sense of divinity.

There were tons of people watching her as well—— The festival staff, groups of people wearing matching T-shirts, teachers, the sisters, visitors and their children, big groups of friends, couples holding hands...

The spectacle before me was not only majestic, but also gentle, cheerful, and even had a hint of sadness to it.

We watched that spectacle from afar as we made our way to the chapel.

Then all of a sudden, as we were walking, I heard several loud shouts of joy from behind.

I guess they must've just lit the firewood altar they made.

But I didn't turn around to look.

By the time we got to the clubroom the other five members, Maria included, were already present and had a projector set up on top of the table in the middle of the room.

"You're late, Kodaka-senpai. We're already done setting everything up."

Rika said with a smile while fiddling with her laptop connected to the projector.

She was wearing a normal uniform with her hair hanging straight down, just like it was yesterday in the nurse's office.

"Can't help it, we live pretty far away," I said, and then asked,

"...Were you editing the movie today, too?"

"You bet."

Rika readily admitted to it with a nod.

Come to think of it, I just realized that she never did say what she was gonna do today when I texted everyone earlier.

"You know..."

Don't push yourself too hard, is what I wanted to tell her, but I stopped myself midway.

Because I realized that there was no point in me going out of my way to tell her that.

I'm sure she chose to be our little helper in the shadows, just like she always has, well aware that we'd say something like that to her .

"Ahh, ahem."

Rika cleared her throat and got up from her chair.

She then made a serious look on her face, and said,

"Rika is terribly sorry for causing you all so much trouble the other day."

After her polite apology, she bowed deeply at all of us.

"Hmph, i-it's not that big of a deal..." Yozora said with an awkward look on her face. I bet she wanted to say more than that, but couldn't think of how to put it into words.

"Do not concern yourself over it, Ms. Rika," Yukimura added after Yozora's comment, in her usual gentle voice.

"Who cares about that, just get to the movie already! I've been waiting forever to see this thing!"

Sena shouted, trying to hurry things along.

Looks like she really doesn't mind what happened at all and just wants to see the movie.

Seeing Sena act like that, Rika squinted her eyes as though looking at something bright and made a wry smile.

"Ahaha, I wanna see it too!" said Maria.

"Kukuku... By all means, humans... Show me the fruits of your unsightly, futile resistance..." said Kobato.

Rika smiled after hearing everyone's responses, and then said,

"Alright then, here we go! Please turn the lights off."

"You got it!"

I went and turned the lights off.

Rika then clicked her mouse, causing an image to show up on one of the clubroom's white walls.

At the same time, I heard an upbeat song start playing outside.

The song's title was "Mayim Mayim".

Apparently they'd started the folk dance around the campfire, one of the major events in any successful youth.

Shortly after though, a loud majestic song started playing through the speakers in the clubroom, as if to cut off the music from the outside.

The song that was playing was none other than the "Monster Hunters" opening theme song.

Most of the BGM for our movie was taken (without permission) from various games in Sena's possession.

Several golden dragons appeared on the screen, causing Maria and Kobato to both go "Ohhhh!" in awe.

"Muu..."

"Wow..."

Yozora and Yukimura were both staring at the screen as well.

Rika made a faintly triumphant smile after seeing everyone's reactions, and for some reason Sena went "Heheh." and made a self-satisfied look as well.

The dragons twisted and turned around each other before finally combining to form some letters.

The Legend of Sehna Kasi Wazahki the Great

~Love, That is, Discovering That to Live is to Die~

...That title is just as confusing and ridiculous as ever.

And on top of that, the cool music and visuals make how pathetic of a title it is even more apparent.

Yozora and Kobato, who were watching intently until now, both made let-down looks on their faces, all form of expression left Yukimura's face, and Rika let out a small sigh.

Maria went "Ohhhh~" again, and seemed to be enjoying it, while Sena on the other hand was staring at the screen completely hooked.

The title then dissolved into little golden beads of light and vanished, allowing the movie to begin at last——...

光と影

The movie was now over.

In total the movie lasted about an hour, and after it ended the ending theme song "Crow Song" from the 18+ game, "RIA" started playing as the credits began to scroll down the screen.

Aside from our names, there was also a category labeled " Special Thanks" that had the titles of the games we used, the composers of the songs we used, the places we filmed at, the brand of equipment we used, and a bunch of other names that made it look like we'd made some huge Hollywood blockbuster. At the very end, the lines "Goddess of Creation - Sena Kashiwazaki" and " Made by - St. Chronica Academy Neighbors Club" scrolled down the screen, after which the words "THE END" were displayed.

The music stopped playing right as those final words were displayed on screen.

"....."

After several seconds of silence, I got up, and turned the lights back on.

"Hahhhh~ That was an awesome movie..."

Sena said with a look of ecstasy on her face.

"A moving story, and some fast-paced visuals and music to go with it! That was a masterpiece, we could win an award with it for sure! I really outdid myself this time! You did good too Rika, nice job! I still kinda feel like it's a bit lacking to be the debut work for a genius director such as myself, but I guess it'll do!"

Sena energetically patted Rika on the back with a big smile on her face.

"...God you're annoying."

Rika murmured under her breath, seeming to be honestly pissed off. She's actually kinda scary.

"Eh? Did you say something?"

"No, nothing at all. I'm honored to receive your praise."

Rika emotionlessly replied, her face devoid of any expression.

"Yep yep, you should be!"

Sena smiled cheerfully at her response.

"......Well, the action was good. The CG was all really cool too... I even shot out a dragon at one point..."

Yozora seemed surprisingly satisfied with the outcome.

"My battle with Yozora-anego was truly spectacular."

Yukimura said with a tender smile, to which Yozora added with a nod, "Yeah, that scene was a work of art in and of itself." However she then said,

".....I have no idea why we were fighting each other though."

"You couldn't tell either, Anego? Truthfully, I was quite confused myself..."

Yukimura echoed Yozora's sentiments.

"Kukuku... To think you would be able to reproduce my ultimate hidden skill, the anti-god spell 'Demiurge Judgment', to such an extent... Not bad for a human, I must say..."

Kobato seemed pleased as she complimented Rika, after which Sena's eyes lit up as she yelled,

"I know, right!? I'm glad you liked it!"

"I wasn't talking to you, moron."

Kobato irritatedly snapped at Sena, causing Sena to tear up.

"K-Kobato-chan you're so cold...! But you're cute that way too..."

You don't care how she acts, do you?

"So wait! Why aren't any of you praising the story!?"

Sena angrily directed her gaze at me, to which I responded by swiftly looking away.

"Even Kodaka..... Uuu... I can't believe none of you can appreciate the godliness of my story! You must all be a bunch of idiots!"

"Don't get mad at us for your crappy writing, you nutjob of an author." Yozora curtly replied.

"Hah!? How 'bout you shut up, you useless little plagiarist!"

"Ugh..."

Yozora's face twitched a bit at that one.

She'd recovered from her previous fall from grace and had been filming with us normally the past few days, but apparently that topic is still a sore spot for her.

"Hey~ Hey~ Sena, I thought your story was really good!"

"Eh!?"

Sena's face brightened up again after hearing what Maria had to say.

""""""""Eh?""""""""

The rest of us all made confused looks.

"Y-you think so...? Was it that good?"

"Yeah! It was super good!"

"Y-you don't say..."

Sena let a big grin find its way onto her face.

"Heheh, I used to think that you were just a snot-nosed idiot before, but now I can see why you were able to skip grades! I guess only geniuses can understand my story!"

Said Sena, looking positively triumphant as she threw in an insult to Maria in there like it was nothing. In response to her, Maria said, with a big smile on her face,

"Ahaha, yeah, it's 'cause I'm a genius! It was super cool how you had magic and dragons come out of nowhere! Oh, also, the way you had no foreshadowing for it made it **so ridiculous** it was funny! I think it's good how you had them fight even though there was no real reason to! You must've been making a commentary on modern society! Not just anyone can write a **social comedy** like that, you're amazing Sena! Your movie was super funny **just like Onii-chan's stories**! Ahaha!"

".....It was supposed to be an epic romance fantasy..... Wait... Like Kodaka's stories...? I don't think I've ever been so humiliated in my life..."

Crunch...!

"Fueh!?"

Maria jumped back in shock after seeing that Sena was shaking with anger and grinding her teeth.

I'm the one who's humiliated here... I can't believe my jokes are on the same level as some nonsense story...

"...Hmph... Seeing as how she likes Kodaka's stories too, this must mean that Maria likes **nonsense-type** comedy."

"Oh, I get it! Now it all makes sense."

Rika said in agreement with Yozora, who was nodding her head in understanding.

"N-nonsense-type...!? My stories are...!?"

"Uu~! I won't forget this! Next time I'm gonna make a story so amazing you'll all be bowing before me!"

Sena yelled with tears in her eyes, right after which Yukimura added,

"That's Sena-anego for you. Her indomitable will to stand back up and try again, even after suffering such an **utterly crushing defeat**, is truly awe-inspiring."

"An utterly crushing defeat!? Was it that bad!?"

"I was merely joking."

Yukimura said to Sena, who was hanging her head in depression, with an impish yet gentle smile on her face.

"...Actually, is there even gonna be a next time?" I asked.

"Of course there will be! I'm not gonna let things end like this!"

Sena strongly declared, having raised her head back up.

She then looked around at us and timidly asked,

"......We are gonna do it again, right...?"

"...I guess, if I feel like it. ...It *was* pretty fun and all."

Yozora curtly answered in a small voice.

Nobody else said no either, and seemed to be optimistic about doing it again.

"...Doing all the editing work myself was pretty tough though, so at least go out and teach yourselves the basics if you wanna do it again, okay?" said Rika with a wry smile.

"I will do just that, Ms. Rika."

"Ahaha, I'm gonna learn how to use a computer so I can shoot out dragons!"

"Ah, you don't have to do anything Maria. I'm afraid you'd break something."

"(´･`)"

"I'm just kidding, I'll teach you if you want."

Rika ——the biggest contributor to our movie by far—— said with a smile on her face.

...Thus, the Neighbors Club's activities for the cultural festival came to a close without anyone but us knowing.

We were all over the place from the moment we started.

We had script troubles, fought over who would play what roles, and even found out the script we had was plagiarized, which in the end forced us to use the script for some nonsense story instead.

We weren't able to finish in time, and didn't get to show our movie at the festival.

After countless bumps along the way, we managed to finish our movie, but it was completely ridiculous, its only merit being the amazing visuals and (essentially stolen) music.

And then, while everyone else was outside dancing around the sparkling flames, we watched our movie in our clubroom.

That's the entirety of our cultural festival experience, a big mess from start to finish, that would probably look like a failure to anyone else.

But even so, I think this past month has left me feeling more fulfilled than not just any other cultural festival, but more fulfilled than any other point in my life.

This place I've found is the kind of place that you need a miracle to find, the kind of place that some people can go their whole lives without finding, and the feeling of fulfillment I get from it is so strong that it makes me want to protect it, even if I have to sacrifice my future to do so.

The End.

Cowardly Pride and Pompous Shame

Unfortunately, however, this is not where our story full of misfortune ends.

The end of the festival signaled the return to our usual daily lives.

Our extended vacation ended yesterday, on Monday, and upon reaching school today I quickly noticed that all the decorations at the school gate and in the school yard were gone.

That said, it was only the parts that you could see from the outside that had been completely cleaned up. Inside there were still tons of cardboard boxes and supplies lying around, and plenty of posters were still up on the walls too.

The entire school was full of that unique relaxed feeling you get after the end of a festival.

It feels like there are more students than usual close to falling asleep in the middle of class as well, myself included.

And on top of that, we're currently in the middle of modern Japanese, the number one class to put you to sleep, and just staying awake is taking all the energy I have.

The current subject we're covering is Atsushi Nakajima's *Sangetsuki*.

It's set in ancient China, and apparently it's about an amazing poet down on his luck who ultimately goes insane and turns into a tiger.

"...Then, Richou quit his job and cut off all contact with other people in order to focus solely on his poetry, however he had quite a hard time coming up with anything. What would you usually do in this situation? ...What do you think, Mikadzuki?"

The mild-mannered teacher was giving his lecture in a leisurely tone of voice as he slowly walked around the room, and then stopped to ask Yozora a question.

By the way, the teachers here pick on Yozora fairly often to answer questions.

If I had to say why... it's probably because they think that they can move the class along more smoothly by having an honor student like Yozora answer the question.

I figured Yozora would matter-of-factly state the correct answer as she always did, however to my surprise she went "Eh..." and seemed to be at a loss for what to say.

She flipped through her textbook in a slightly hurried manner, and then quietly answered in a voice lacking confidence,

".....Get mad at myself...?"

She must've chosen that as her answer because in the text it stated that Richou had self-derisive tendencies.

"Hahaha, it's not every day we get to hear a joke from you, Mikadzuki."

The teacher cheerfully laughed, honestly thinking she was joking.

However Yozora only fell further into panic.

"Eh... Ah... Um..... I don't know then."

"Haha..."

The teacher laughed again as Yozora answered with a straight face, however he appeared to have noticed that Yozora truly didn't know the answer, and then said, "How about you, Suzuki? What would you do?" choosing to ask the student sitting behind Yozora next.

"Umm... Talk to someone else about it?"

"That's right, normally in this type of situation you'd ask someone for help, however Richou――..."

Suzuki's quick, off-the-cuff answer appeared to be the one the teacher was looking for, as he then continued his lecture.

As for Yozora, she was staring straight downwards, glaring at her textbook, and her face was bright red all the way up to her ears .

"Argh, I can't stand it!"

After school, as we were making our way to the clubroom, Yozora finally snapped once we'd made our way to where nobody else was.

"C-can't stand what?"

It was so sudden I was more surprised than anything.

"Isn't it obvious!? I'm talking about earlier in modern Japanese class!"

"Ahh..."

Modern Japanese was three periods ago... so about five hours ago now. How long has she been thinking about this?

"...Pretty rare to see you get a question wrong. Did you not read the story ahead of time?"

"No, I read it just fine. His stupid question wasn't in the book..."

Yozora said with a frown on her face.

"Well, it was more like a part of his lecture than an actual question about the story. Makes sense it wouldn't be in the book."

I said, however Yozora only got angrier.

"I can't believe he'd ask such a ridiculous question, that damn sadist of a teacher! Sneaky jerk! Moron! Baldy! Retard! Jerk! Idiot! Poophead!"

I'm guessing it's because she lost her cool, but Yozora's insults were pretty lacking compared to usual.

"And besides, if he was the kind of person who could just ask others for help when he needed it, he wouldn't have quit his job to become a poet in the first place, you damn idiot! That bald moron has no idea how Richou actually felt! That bald imbecile has no place talking about Richou's noble ambitions! That stupid idiot!"

"Y-yeah..."

I said, ignoring Yozora with a wry smile.

...I'd say he's actually a pretty good teacher myself, considering he noticed Yozora didn't know the answer and quickly moved to another student.

Yozora's complaining eventually moved from insulting our teacher and empathizing with Richou, to her own little theory on " What literature really is", and then to her criticizing Japan's education system.

She was so all over the place I had no idea what she wanted to say though.

"Also, how can you even measure how much somebody has to be suffering to turn into a tiger, I mean—— Kodaka, are you listening?"

"Eh? Oh, y-yeah. Authors sure have it rough~"

"Yeah, that's exactly right! Even the most skilled author will make a mistake or two when they're faced with overwhelming distress..."

"Like plagiarizing?"

"...Eh... Y-yeah... I-I s-suppose some authors m-might do that t-too... Jerk."

Yozora's flowing critiques came to a crashing halt as she quieted up like a cat that'd just been scolded. Guess I don't have to worry about her turning into a tiger like Richou...

...Actually though, as a matter of fact, back during class I was just as lost as Yozora on how to answer that question that our classmate, Suzuki, answered without even having to really think about it.

Asking others for help, huh...

...They make it sound so easy...

The Friend-Making Game

"I see you're all here, foolish commoners! And my lovely angel, Kobato-chan!"

Sena energetically burst into the clubroom about five minutes after Yozora and I arrived.

Yozora, Rika, Yukimura, Kobato, Maria, and I were all already here.

Kobato twitched and made an unpleasant look on her face upon seeing her.

"Shut up, die baldy."

Said Yozora, who had been pissed off ever since we got here, without so much as looking up from the Japanese textbook she was reading.

"Baldy!? I've never had someone call me that before..."

Sena seemed to be more surprised than angry.

"Huh? Why are you reading a Japanese textbook?"

"...No reason, I just felt like it today."

"Oh? Well whatever, what you do doesn't matter. More importantly!"

Sena said as she took something out of the paper bag she was holding.

It was a fairly big box, about 50cm in length and width.

"We're playing this today!"

Bam! Went the box as she slammed it down on the table.

Right after which, I heard the following:

"Sensei~"

I turned and saw that it was Rika, who'd been absorbed in playing her PSP ever since we got here, who said it, with one hand raised and one hand still playing the PSP. (Her hair was straight again today, and she wasn't wearing her glasses, lab coat, or even her uniform. Instead she had on a pair of casual fall clothes, and overall she looked pretty cute).

"What?"

"Can I go home for today instead? I want to clear the rebirth chapter in Ultra Mecha Z."

"No, do it later."

"...Muu, but I have tons of games, books, and anime sitting in my backlog to get to..."

Rika reluctantly lifted her head, and looked over at the box Sena brought.

"What's this?"

"The Friend-Making Game Dee Ecks...?"

Yukimura read the title written on the box aloud.

"It's read as 'deluxe,' not letters D and X," I said, fulfilling my duties as the straight man here.

The Friend-Making Game DX

A picture of a bunch of kids smiling like they were on drugs while playing the game was drawn on the cover of the box, along with the words "The best party game around! Enjoy it with all your friends!" written in a font that looked like the letters were made of blood.

"I found this at a toy shop nearby a little while ago! I figured we could play it after the festival was over! How about it!? Isn't it the perfect game for the Neighbors Club!?"

Sena said with a triumphant look on her face.

Nobody voiced any objections, especially given a title like that.

"...*The Friend-Making Game*... I can't believe there's actually a game called that..."

Even Yozora, who usually opposes anything Sena wants to do, seemed to be half in awe and half in shock.

"Hey~ Hey~ How do we play it!?"

Maria seemed to be incredibly interested in the game.

"Hmm... It appears to be a board game that uses a six-sided die along with some other factors added on, similar to Monopoli and Lyfe..."

Rika said while looking at the box from various angles with a serious expression on her face.

"...What do you mean, 'appears to be'? That's exactly what it is, isn't it?"

I said in retort to Rika, causing her to blush as she said,

"...I-I can't help it, I've never played an analog game like this before!"

"Really?"

"Oh, so are you saying you have!?"

In response to Rika, who was getting all mad for some reason, I said,

"If you count Sugoroku, then yeah. ...I've played it with Kobato and Dad... We've got Monopoli at home too, but Kobato didn't understand the rules."

"A-an-chan! Don't tell them that!"

Kobato said in protest with a pair of red cheeks.

"Ku... Kukuku... I-I am not good with such difficult things..."

"Well, I guess Monopoli's rules are pretty complicated."

"Onii-chan! The hag and I used to play Monopoli a long time ago! At first the hag was a little better than me, but eventually I got so good at it that nobody could beat me!"

"Ugugu――..."

Kobato groaned in frustration after hearing Maria's declaration.

"I too have played Sugoroku on occasion," said Yukimura.

"...Me too... a long time ago, I..."

Yozora said in a forlorn tone of voice, but then cut herself off midway and instead said, as if trying to cover something up,

"I-I've always been pretty interested in analog games. Shogi, Chess, Trump, Uno, Othello, Sugoroku, Monopoli, Lyfe, Yu-Gi-Ou cards, History of the Universe, you name it..."

"Oh? That's unexpected. How did you do trading card games th―― Ah."

"Hmph, Tomo-cha――"

"Save your breath, I already know what you're gonna say."

Yozora made her mouth into a after being interrupted by me, and then said "I'm actually really good at solitaire and eight queens..." as if pouting. Those are both single-player games for crying out loud.

"I've played a few too, mostly on New Year's with Papa and our relatives," said Sena.

"...Muu... So then Rika is the only one who's never played a board game at all?"

Rika seemed to be pouting a bit as well, and pursed her lips.

"Relax, I'll teach you! Ok, so, do you know what a die is? It's a cube with the numbers one through six on-"

"I-I know what a board game is okay!? I've just never played one! Why would you start by explaining what a die is anyway!? Are you making fun of me!? I'll have you know I was making random number generators back when I was in diapers!"

Rika exploded on Sena who, despite talking in an incredibly condescending way, probably didn't mean anything bad by it.

"Y-you don't have to get so mad about it. I was just trying to be nice."

"...You truly are a genius at annoying others, aren't you..."

Yozora said with an appalled look on her face.

"Eh, did you just say I'm a genius!?"

"Don't just ignore the parts you don't wanna hear, stupid meat."

Smack, went Yozora's flyswatter as she landed a blow on Sena.

"...Still, pretty amazing you could program when you were in diapers," I whispered to Rika.

"...I'm sorry, that was a lie."

Replied Rika in a faintly embarrassed tone of voice before turning her face down towards the ground.

After a few more minutes of going back and forth, we all agreed on playing *The Friend-Making Game* today.

Apparently even Sena hasn't played it yet, so we decided to go through the rule book together before actually starting.

The game uses a die, just like I expected, and from the looks of it the game takes you from your first day of high school all the way to graduation.

You can play the game with just two people, but I suppose you could even play with only one actual person if you use an air friend.

The exact rules written in the rule book are as follows:

● Each turn roll the die and move the amount of spaces you rolled. Follow the instructions on each space you land on until you reach the goal (graduation).

● At the start of the game, each player is given five friends and 1000 yen (not real money, but play money, of course), and three random items.

"Haha, five friends on the first day of school...? This game could stand to be a bit more realistic, am I right?"

"Kodaka, shut up. (Sena)"

"Sorry."

● You can gain and lose both friends and money depending on the space you land on. If a player ever runs out of money or friends they lose.

"So you can't live without money, huh? Tough world out there~"

Maria said with a pensive expression on her face.

"You lose if you run out of friends, too, huh... Hah, if this was real life we'd all have lost before we even started."

"......*Grin*"

...I shut up after feeling a silent pressure coming from Rika.

● You can receive varying amounts of money when you reach the goal depending on how quick you were, and for each 1000 yen you have you gain one friend.

● The game ends when all remaining players have reached the goal, and the player with the most friends wins.

"...Papa told me to watch out for people who look nice but are only after my money."

Sena said with a completely serious look on her face.

"...That really means something coming from him, too."

Pegasus must've gone through a lot of that kind of stuff. Being rich isn't easy I suppose.

● You can use one item per turn before you roll the die. Some items will require you to pay with your money or friends before using them.

"Pay with my friends!?"

"That sounds pretty scary..."

Sena and Yozora said, one after the other.

● Players who have yet to reach the goal are allowed to trade their friends, money, and items for anything they want at any time they wish.

"So basically, if it looks like you're about to lose then you can use your money to buy friends from somebody else..."

Yozora murmured to herself with a frown on her face. She then knit her eyebrows, and added,

"...What an awful system."

"If you look at it the other way, it also means you can sell your friends when you need money... That's even worse if you ask me," said Rika.

"If Aniki needed the money, I would not mind being sold to a debt collector."

"I'd never sell you, alright!?"

I'd never fall that far in debt in the first place! As I was thinking that to myself,

"Aniki... Such a gentle man you are..."

Yukimura said the above to me with a look of admiration on her face.

After we'd all memorized the rules, we decided to start playing the actual game itself.

We decided the order we'd go in by playing rock-paper-scissors , and the order ended up being Sena, Maria, Me, Yozora, Rika, Yukimura, Kobato.

"OK, here I go!"

Sena rolled the die. Incidentally, the die was just a plain six-sided one.

She ended up rolling a 6.

"Alright, a 6 on the first roll, that's just how awesome I am! I'm gonna be the first to the goal and win this thing for sure!"

Sena happily moved her piece six spaces forward, and then read the instructions on the space she landed on.

"Umm... **'You go too crazy on the first day of school and creep people out. You lose two friends.'**.....Ehhh!?"

Sena let out a scream at the sudden disaster that had befallen her.

"...That's pretty realistic... I can easily imagine Meat getting so over-excited about starting high school that she'd even freak out her few remaining friends from middle school."

Yozora said in a casual tone of voice.

"Wow, she's really changed..."

"Yeah... She's just not the same anymore, is she..."

Yozora and Rika said with distant looks in their eyes, one after the other, as they acted out the role of Sena's ex-friends. They sure are into this.

"T-that's never happened to me!" Sena said with tears in her eyes, and then said, "Besides, anyone who'd stop being friends after a little thing like that was never a real friend in the first place! These three here are my real friends!"

After tossing away two of her friends (ie. two little plastic sticks about as long as a match), Sena tenderly gripped her remaining three.

"Uu... Akane, Yayoi, Reika... you three are my only real friends in this world..."

"You gave them names? Seriously...?"

Incidentally, the friend sticks are all the same size and color, making it impossible to tell the difference between them.

"Ahaha, now it's my turn!"

Maria happily rolled the die.

Sadly, she rolled a 6 as well.

Maria's face went blank as the moved her piece six spaces forward and silently threw away two of her friends.

"...Now that I think about it... I did the same thing when I came to high school too... Ahaha..."

Maria said, laughing with lifeless eyes.

"A-alright then, guess I'm up next! Ahaha..."

I said, trying to sound as cheerful as possible, before rolling the die.

I ended up with a 1.

"Haha, a 1? Well, at least I won't mess up the first day of school. Let's see..."

I moved one space forward, and read the space I was on.

Now's your chance to make a big splash on the first day of school! Move forward five spaces and show your classmates what you've got!

.....That excited tone of writing makes it even more irritating.

Anyway, I moved forward five spaces and threw away two of my friends.

"Ahaha, Onii-chan messed up too! Yayyy, Onii-chan and I both messed up! Ahahaha! Wooo!"

Maria yelled with a smile on her face as she gave me a big hug.

"Yep, we're like peas in a pod."

"Ahahaha!"

Maria's smile got even bigger as I patted her on the head.

It sucks remembering how I was late the first day of school, but whatever, I guess it's fine as long as Maria's happy...

"...Hmph, if someone turned into a lolicon freak when they got into high school, I'd stop being friends with them too..."

Yozora said with a frown before rolling the die.

She rolled a 2.

"...Umm... **'You worked up the courage to go to a beauty salon before school started, but they cut your hair weird and it bothered you so much that you fiddled with it all morning causing you to be late for the first day of school. You lose one friend.'**.....What are you, me!?"

Yozora retorted with all her might after shakily reading the instructions on the space she landed on.

"That's certainly an original retort..."

"Are you me!?... Well, not me, but Yozora-senpai."

"Yozora, did that actually happen to you?"

".....Yeah, but it wasn't the first day of school. Wait, who cares about that! Come on, you're up next!"

Yozora forcefully changed the subject and handed the die to Rika.

However Rika didn't roll it right away, and instead stared at the board and said, "...Hmm... So 1, 2, 4, and 6 are all bad spaces... A 5 would be the best option here..."

Apparently she was checking the spaces, so I asked,

"What's the point in checki—— Wait, can you...!?"

I gulped after seeing how serious Rika looked.

Yozora gulped too, and said,

"Are you... Are you saying you can control what number the die lands on...!?"

Rika made a fearless smile at both of our surprised reactions.

T-that's a genius scientist for you, she can do almost anything...!

"Hehe... Now then, just watch... as Rika reveals to you her powers as the goddess of Newtonian mechanics...!"

"Kukuku... The famed Newtonia mechanics, is it... to think someone other than myself would have mastered them...!"

Kobato tried sounding shocked in her usual exaggerated tone of voice, but it's Newtonian, not Newtonia.

"Potential energy, check. Rebound coefficient, check. From this height, at this angle, at this speed... now!"

Rika rolled the die as everyone watched in dead silence.

Clack, clack——..... she rolled a 4.

"(･<) Obviously, there's no way I can control the roll of a die. ... Ehe, this is the first time I've ever rolled a real die."

Rika happily moved her piece four spaces forward, ignoring our disappointment.

"Umm, **'You get mugged by a delinquent right after the entrance ceremony. You lose 500 yen.'** ...Geez, what'd you do that for Kodaka-senpai!?"

"It wasn't me!"

"Let's see, 500 yen. Here."

Rika got rid of 500 yen (five 100 yen chips), all the while completely ignoring my objection to her terrible accusation against me.

"You're so lucky Ms. Rika... I wish Aniki would mug me, too..."

"Are you deaf? It wasn't me!"

Yukimura ignored me as well, and then rolled the die.

The roll was a 3.

"It says, **'You manage to fit into class without standing out.'**"

"Oh...? Good for you."

I said, honestly a bit jealous of her, but in response she unhappily replied,

"...A true warrior would never live such a conservative life..."

"Kukuku... it appears as though it is finally my turn..."

Kobato grabbed the die in her right hand, then brought her hand up to her forehead and went "Haaaaaaa!" as if gathering her strength..... Not that it'll do her any good.

"Kukuku... Oh Newtonia of the four great clansmen of the darkness... Answer my call and lend me your strength... My name is Leysis vi Felicity Sumeragi... Queen of the Great——"

"Hurry up and roll you poophead."

Smack!

Maria hit the hand Kobato was holding the die in.

"Ah!"

Clack—— the die rolled, and a 5 came up.

"What the heck'd ya' do that for ya' moron!"

"You were taking too long!"

"Ugugh...!"

Kobato moved her piece five spaces forward while groaning.

"...Umm... **'You become friends with the person in the seat next to you. You gain one friend.'** Yay!"

Kobato let out a yell of joy, but then as if to try and hide it, she said,

"Kukuku... Well done in answering my call, great demon Mewtonia..."

And as she did, she grabbed a friend stick from the bag in the center of the board and added it to her collection.

"So we've all gone once now... This is a pretty harsh game..."

Yozora murmured with a frown on her face.

After one round of turns, everyone aside from Kobato who gained a friend and Yukimura who stayed neutral all took some fairly big hits.

"Since only the 3rd and 5th spaces are safe, that means they made it so you have a 66% chance of losing something on your first turn... This game is seriously hard..." I said.

"That just goes to show how hard it is to go through your first day of high school safely."

"...Not really. I mean, you still have a 33% chance of succeeding. If anything that's way easier than real life..."

Yozora said with a scowl after hearing what Rika had to say.

"Alright, I'm gonna take my second turn then! I've gotta at least win in this game if I wanna win in real life!"

Sena said in high spirits as she rolled the die for the second time .

She rolled a 6 again. That'd be pretty lucky if we were playing Sugoroku, but...

"...It says, **'You lose one friend after making a callous statement.'**... What the heck!?" Sena yelled.

"...Yet another situation I can easily imagine you being in."

"Yeah..." "It's very realistic." "Yep..."

Rika, Yukimura, and myself all agreed with Yozora.

"Uuu! Isn't forgiving someone for accidentally saying something a little mean part of being friends!?"

"Hahaha, just be quiet and throw away one of your friends already, fool."

"You're seriously evil, you know that...!"

While wincing at the fact that it's only times like these that Yozora makes a truly happy smile, I watched as Sena stared intently at her three remaining friend sticks.

"Heh... Akane, Yayoi, or Reika, which will it be...? Which one of them hates you now...?"

Sena started getting teary as Yozora whispered into her ear like some kind of evil witch.

"Uu... I can't get rid of any of them...! Akane and Yayoi and Reika are all good girls!"

"You must be a truly pathetic slab of meat then if even good girls like them hate you now...!"

"T-they don't hate me...!"

Sena glared at Yozora, and then grabbed a few of her chips and offered them to her.

"Here!"

"...? What do you want?"

"I'll pay you, so sell me one of your friends! I'll get rid of them instead!"

"...Uwa... You're the worst..."

Yozora looked seriously taken aback.

"W-what do you care? It's just a game!"

That's not something someone going out of their way to buy a friend from someone else just to throw that friend away should be saying.

"Fool. As if I'd sell you my precious friends just so you can throw them away."

"Come on! Sell me your friends! Sell them!"

"No!"

Smack!

"Ow!"

Sena finally gave up after facing the might of Yozora's weaponry (aka her flyswatter).

"Fine, then Rika! You just got mugged and need money, right!? Here, I'll give you some money so sell me one of your friends!"

"...Uwa... This is like the perfect example of what a scumbag would do..."

Rika looked just as taken aback as Yozora did.

"Just so you know, Rika would never sell her friends."

"Uuu! T-then Kobato-chan! Sell some of your friends to your big sister♥"

"No!!"

Kobato refused Sena like usual as Sena spat out one of the worst things I think she's ever said to her.

"Ehh~ Pleeeease Kobato-chan! Sell me that new friend you just made~♥"

"No!!"

"...I'm pretty sure the rules said you could trade for anything you want, right... In that case... What if I give you some real money instead of game money!? I'll give you 10,000 for one of your friends♥"

"...Uu... T-ten thousand...?"

"Yeah, 10,000! You can buy anything with 10,000 yen! Candy, video games, anime, you name it!"

"Uu... Uuu..."

"Guhehe~ Kobato-chan, guhehe~"

Sena's expression was now completely that of a pervert as she watched Kobato struggle to decide.

However just as I was about to tell her to give it a rest already,

"Give it a rest already, you stupid piece of meat!"

Yozora utilized her flyswatter attack again.

"Uuu~"

Sena got teary-eyed again and finally backed away from Kobato .

"...Sena-anego, I would be willing to offer you one of my friends if you so desire."

Yukimura said, seemingly unable to watch this go on any more.

"Really!? How much do you want for them!?"

"I do not require any payment."

"Eh!? Really!?"

"Yes, for I do not need any friends."

Yukimura said without a moment's hesitation, despite the fact that what she'd just said goes against the entire point of the Neighbors Club, before handing Sena one of her friend sticks.

"Uu... You really are... a nice person... I'm sorry I always thought you were weird, and that you had no presence, like a ghost, and that I always avoided being alone with you 'cause I thought you were kinda creepy...!"

"...That is how you thought of me?"

Yukimura looked a little upset as Sena listed off an unwanted string of insults in the midst of her joy.

In any case, Sena finally got a new friend, which she quickly threw away and ended her turn.

Right after which, Yozora said,

"...This is just a suggestion, but how about we ban the use of real money from now on? Don't want Meat to go crazy on us again ."

Kobato deeply nodded her head up and down in agreement.

Sena didn't say anything back either, apparently having realized she went overboard just now, and since the rest of us all agreed with Yozora, the use of real money in-game was banned.

"Ahaha, it's finally my turn!"

The next space Maria landed on had her receive an allowance of 500 yen.

"Ohhhhhhhh!? Awesome! I got 500 yen for doing nothing! Wow ! Ahahahahaha! Yayyyyyyyyy!! Fuohhhhhhh!! Hey, hey, this is so cool! Ahahahaha! Yay Yay Yay!! Wheeee! Wheee! Wahohohooooohhhhh!!"

Maria rolled around in wild joy like a dog with a new toy.

I took my turn and rolled the die next, and moved 3 spaces forward.

"Umm, **'Your English teacher tells you to make groups of two and do some conversation practice, but you fail to find someone to group up with. You lose one friend.'**... What are you, me!?"

I made the same retort Yozora did a little while ago.

This game is so detailed it's like rubbing salt in my wounds...

Yozora took her turn next.

"I'm using an item before I roll."

She coolly said before flipping one of her item cards over and showing it to us.

The card had a drawing of a broken vending machine on it, and it read:

"The targeted player loses 500 yen. If the player has less than 500 yen, they lose all but 100 yen."

Given that the item wasn't especially strong, there were no requirements for using it.

"Uu..."

Rika winced as she currently only has 500 yen left. She'd still have 100 yen left if Yozora used it on her, so it wouldn't be game over, but she'd certainly be in a bad position.

"My target is——"

Yozora said as she slowly pointed the card in Maria's direction.

"Fueh!?"

"Heheh..."

A sadistic smile appeared on Yozora's face as she saw Maria's shock.

"I... lose my money? Even though I just got 500 yen...? It's a tough world out there, huh..."

I felt bad for Maria after seeing how sad she was.

"The world is a harsh place, Maria," Yozora said with a gentle smile.

"For Meat that is!"

Yozora yelled as she quickly slapped the card down in front of Sena.

"Wha...!?"

"Come on, hurry up and get rid of your 500 yen."

"Kh... You little...!"

Sena said as she reluctantly threw away a 500 yen chip.

"Figures you'd do something pathetic like this! Too bad your stupid attack means nothing to me!"

"...Hmph, I knew it wouldn't. It was a weak item after all. I just wanted to use it to mess with you."

I could see a faint smile forming on Yozora's face as she coolly replied to Sena.

"...I see, so that's how it is."

"How what is?"

I asked Rika, who seemed to have realized something, to which she whispered in my ear,

"Look at the space six spaces in front of where Sena is."

Uwa, I can feel her breathing on me.

"U-umm, six spaces ahead? ...Ah."

I realized as soon as I saw it.

Out of the six spaces in front of Sena's piece, spaces 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 all had the player lose over 500 yen.

In other words, Sena now has a five-in-six chance of running out of money and losing on her next turn.

"I just wanted to use it to mess with you" my ass... She's going for the jugular...

Sena doesn't seem to be aware of what Yozora is up to at all, either.

Yozora continued to act natural as she threw the die for her turn and moved her piece. The space she landed on had her lose 200 yen.

"Ahaha, that's what you get for attacking me! I~diot I~diot!"

"Kh...! Fine..."

Sena laughed happily as Yozora threw her chips away with a seemingly frustrated groan.

However she then turned her face so Sena couldn't see and made an evil smirk as if to say "You're the idiot here..."

After Yozora was Rika, then Yukimura, and then Kobato, all of whom managed to safely finish their turn without taking any damage, leaving us now at Sena's third turn.

As I was wondering whether or not I should tell Sena about the minefield she was walking into, she quickly grabbed the die and rolled it without an ounce of hesitation.

She rolled a 4—— the only safe roll she could have made.

"Hmm, 4, huh? Guess not even I can get three 6's in a row. Too bad."

Sena lightheartedly moved her piece up four spaces, completely unaware that she'd just narrowly escaped losing.

"Let's see, **'You get a part-time job. Collect 700 yen.'** Ah, lucky♪ "

"Gh...!"

Yozora groaned, this time probably for real, as she watched Sena take seven 100 yen coins from the pile on the board.

After Sena, Maria and I both took our turns and lost some money, at which point Sena said,

"Huh, I just realized but this area here is pretty tough, isn't it."

Guess she finally realized how dangerous this part of the board is. Doesn't look like she noticed Yozora's failed plan though.

Yozora then took her turn and rolled the die while making an irritated face at Sena's carefree attitude.

Ironically, she ended up getting caught in the damage zone just like Maria and I did.

"...**'You get mugged by a delinquent and lose 600 yen.'**... Kodaka!"

"Stop thinking it's me!!"

I yelled back at her because I thought she was accusing me like Rika did, but to my surprise...

"T-that's not it! .....C-can you lend me 300 yen?"

Yozora said the above with a pair of red cheeks.

Yozora was currently only at 200 yen after landing on a bunch of money losing spaces. If she lands on any of the other money loss spaces in front of her she'd probably be out of the game.

"I've only got 500 left myself though... How about 100 instead?"

"Hey hey~ Yozora, you need money? Want me to give some to you?"

"I don't need your charity! Screw you!"

Yozora refused Sena's offer with a glare.

"A-anyway lend me that 100 yen please... Kodaka..."

"S-sure..."

I handed Yozora a 100 yen coin as she looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Yozora-anego, I shall offer you some as well."

Yukimura then handed her 200 yen.

Yukimura made one of her usual tender smiles in response to Yozora's surprise, and said,

"A true warrior has no need for money."

"I see... Thanks Yukimura...! Sorry I always thought letting you join our club was a mistake...!"

"....."

Yukimura silently stared at Yozora with a look of disdain as Yozora insulted her in the midst of her joy.

Anyway that aside, this whole trade system is a kind of a pain.

Normally you'd want to borrow money from Sena, who has the most money, but Yozora didn't because she hates her.

Unlike your typical single-player RPG, people's real life relationships can affect things here.

"Looks like Rika's up next. I'll use my 'Dash' item."

The card Rika flipped over had a drawing of a pair of running shoes on it, and the effect read: **'The user of this card skips rolling the die and moves six spaces forward.'** The use cost was 100 yen.

By using that card Rika managed to land on the exact same safe space as Sena, allowing her to collect 700 yen.

"Ohhh! So you can use items like that, too!"

Maria said with her eyes open wide.

"...Not bad... Is this really your first time playing a board game?"

"I told you I knew about them, didn't I? I'm just using the knowledge I have."

Rika said in response to my admiration, seeming a bit proud of herself.

Yukimura took her turn next and used an item called 'Bicycle' that read **'Pay 200 yen in order to roll the die twice.'** which allowed her to skip over the danger zone completely, and then land on a space that gave her 500 yen, a friend, and an item.

Next up was Kobato, who said,

"Kukuku... Magic barrier, activate...!"

She'd used an item called "Helmet", the effect of which read: **'For the next 3 turns, the user of this card cannot lose money.'**

Given how good of an item it is, it cost two friends to use.

"Kukuku... Oh evil lord Asmodeus... Accept these sacrifices I offer to you..."

Kobato threw away two of her friends just like that.

"Kobato, you're really just giving up two of your friends like that!?"

"Kukuku... How foolish you are... These are mere sticks of plastic..."

.....Come to think of it, she's right.

I'm surprised how calm and collected she is for this game despite usually coming up with all sorts of weird delusions...

Kobato rolled the die, and calmly moved her piece onto a money losing space.

We then entered the fourth round of turns, having learned that it's important to check the spaces in front of you, to keep in mind who you're trading with, and to use your items wisely.

By now everyone was pretty used to the game, and due to the differences in money and item strength between us, things got even more complicated.

"I used the item 'Download Contents' on Meat! The next time you lose money, you lose twice the amount shown!"

"Uwa, that stings...!"

Yozora kept on setting up traps to try and get rid of Sena, but...

"Umm, I buy juice and pay 100 yen... Ah, I guess it's 200 because of Yozora's item."

"Kh!? But I spent 300 yen to use that...!"

Sena managed to avoid all of them with her lucky rolls of the die.

"...Umm, **'If you have a part-time job, lose one friend and gain 100 yen.'**...Yukimura, give me one of your friends!"

"Understood."

Yukimura gave away one of her friends to Sena for nothing in return.

"Kh... Another hole in my wallet...!? Yukimura! Give me 200 yen !"

"Understood."

Yozora kept landing on money loss spaces and asking Yukimura to give her more money, which Yukimura also gave away for nothing in return.

"Hey~ Hey~ Yukimura, do you have any items I can use to catch that poop vampire!?"

"Feel free to use my 'Motor Bicycle'."

"Ya~y! Now I can roll the die three times!"

Yukiemon even gave away her item cards without hesitation.

"...H-hey, Yukimura. I'm kinda running out of money here too, so, um..."

"I will give you all the money I have, Aniki."

"I-I don't need all of it!"

Even I ended up having to rely on Yukimura after losing a bunch of money.

"Kukuku... I've gained yet another two clansmen..."

Kobato was really lucky with her rolls, and managed to keep getting more money and friends.

"I use the item 'Comp-Gacha'. **'Pay 300 yen in exchange for two new item cards.'**...Oh, this is... Heheheh."

Rika didn't get many good rolls, but she managed to stay in the game by trading and using her items wisely.

"Yozora-senpai, would you like to buy this item for 500 yen?"

"Mu... I could get Meat with that... But 500 is too much. How about 300?"

"...I guess this deal is over then. Sena-senpai――"

"W-wait! 400 then!"

"Hehehe... I knew you'd see things my way..."

We'd all made it about halfway through the game when we had our first game over.

"It says, **'You fall and lose 200 yen.'**"

Yukimura landed on a space with that written on it.

Yukimura was down to 100 yen, one friend, and no items after giving them away to anyone who asked.

She got used for all she was worth until she met her cruel end.

"It was a wonderful end, just like Benkei Musashibou, who took arrow after arrow to protect his lord until he died, still standing on his two feet..."

Yukimura seemed strangely happy for some reason.

"...Yeah, like Benkei, or *The Happy Prince*... I'm sure you'll be rewarded in heaven..."

Yozora said, trying to make Yukimura feel better. She must've felt bad too.

In any case, the game became even more heated now that our prince Yukimura was gone.

"Heheheh... Now there's no one left to give you friends."

Yozora used her item 'Dark Past Note' on Sena as if she'd been waiting for this.

The effect was **'The targeted player loses two friends.'** and the cost for using such a brutal item was one friend.

"Uu... Sorry, I'm sorry...!"

Sena finally gave up the friends she'd been taking care of up until now.

"Leave this to us, you go on ahead Sena-chan! No, there's no way I can do this without you Yayoi-chan! Don't cry Sena, we'll always be friends, even if we're apart! Uu, A-Akane-channnn!"

"Too long."

Yozora emotionlessly slapped Sena's hands to end the little mini-drama she'd started before getting rid of her two friends.

Thus, the two friend sticks fell out of Sena's hands.

However on Sena's next turn,

"**'You run into some old friends from another school on a field trip. You gain two friends.'** Yay! You're back! Akane-chan, Yayoi-chan!"

Sena managed to gain her friends back with impeccable timing.

"N-no way...! Damn it! Fine, then I'll do it again!"

"Ehh!? Why do you have two Dark Past Notes!?"

"...Heh... Guess I've got tons of dark pasts even in games..."

"Kukuku... One who is loved by the dark pasts... So cool..."

Kobato seemed impressed for some reason by Yozora, who'd only said what she did in self-derision.

"Now, fall into the depths of hell, Meat!"

"Are you insane!? You've only got two friends left yourself! This is not the time to be attacking me!"

"There are things more important than one's own life! Tomo-chan #2 will gladly sacrifice herself to kill you!"

"#2!? The heck!? What kinda name is that!?"

"Now go, explode Tomo-chan #2!"

"Noooo!!"

Tomo-chan #2's explosion sent Akane-chan and Yayoi-chan back to the other side, despite having just reunited with Sena. Ouch...

Yozora and Sena are now both down to one friend left.

"Yozora-senpai, you sound just like a terrorist..."

Rika said as a cold sweat ran down the side of her face.

Rika and Kobato then each took their turns, followed by Sena who managed to use her amazing luck to survive another turn, making it now Maria's turn.

"Hmm, I'm running out of friends too~ Ahaha, I'll use this item I just got then! Bammm! Ahahahahaha!"

The item's name was "Stealth Marketing".

The use cost was 1000 yen per remaining player.

The effect read: **"Take one friend from each remaining player."**

That's a pretty brutal card, both in terms of its cost and effect.

"...You impertinent little pawn of God... How dare you cause my clansman to betray me..."

Kobato reluctantly handed Maria one of her friend sticks.

"Ahaha, yay! Now I've got Onii-chan!"

"T-that one's not An-chan you moron! Kukuku... That is the weakest of my clansmen... The great demon Mewtonia..."

The heck, Mewtonia or whatever was still here?

Rika and I each gave Maria one of our friends as well.

"...Tomo-chan... It looks like this is the end for me..."

Yozora hung her head in defeat as she offered up her last friend.

"Uuu~ I'll give you as much money as you want, just don't take Reika from me!"

"Give it up Meat! Admit your defeat! Yukimura!"

"I am at your service."

Yozora and Yukimura tag-teamed Sena and pried the friend stick out of her hand.

"Noooooooooooooo!! I've got money! I can pay youuuu!!"

Thus, both Yozora and Sena were now out of the game.

"Hmph... Money isn't the only thing that matters in the world..."

Perhaps it was because she managed to accomplish her goal of crushing Sena, but Yozora seemed strangely refreshed.

It hasn't even been that long since Yukimura lost, and we've still got a little more than a third of the way to go.

As I worried whether any of us would even make it to the goal or not, Rika, Maria, Kobato and I continued playing.

On Rika's turn,

"Umm, **'You got a boyfriend. Nothing much really happened, but you're really happy!'** Woohoo! Rika is ultra happy right now, Kodaka-senpai!"

"Good for you."

I quickly brushed her off.

...However shortly after that we suffered our fourth casualty.

"Ahahahahaha! Yay, a 6! Ahaha! I've got so many friends, this is so fun! Umm..... Umm....."

Maria, who'd just spent 6000 yen using that item card last turn landed on a space that read, **"You were playing around and broke a classroom window. You lose 1000 yen."** and went bankrupt.

"I'm sorry I played around too much..."

Maria made a crestfallen look on her face and hung her head.

"...Looks like it's just the three of us now. How about we work together for a while? The goal is still a ways off and all."

"...I'm game. We'll all lose at this rate."

"Kukuku... Very well..."

Both Kobato and I agreed to go along with Rika's suggestion.

Kobato aside, I was barely scraping by with the little money and few friends I had left, so Rika's suggestion was perfect for me.

...But, Rika, who was in the safest position when we formed our alliance, met with an unexpected series of tragedies shortly after.

"Your boyfriend forces you to get him a present. You lose 1000 yen."

"You break an important promise with your friends to go on a date instead. You lose two friends."

"You lend your boyfriend some money. You lose 2000 yen."

Rika's bad luck was unbelievable as she stepped on space after space that all had "If you're going out with someone~" followed by some negative effect written on them, causing Rika to lose money and friends at an astonishing rate. No amount of planning could've saved her from that.

"Uoghhhhh...! T-this boyfriend is like a human landmine...! Why can't I dump him...!?"

Rika started to get teary-eyed.

Kobato and I tried to help her out with our money and items, but it was like trying to use a toothpick as an umbrella.

"......Umm... It looks like I'm pregnant now, so, um, do you think you could spare some money for me...?"

"Sorry... But we're at our limit..."

Kobato and I finally had to abandon Rika as she spat out some crazy lines with an exhausted look on her face.

Thus, Rika ran out of money and friends due to her landmine boyfriend and was now out of the game.

As she hung her head in disappointment, she said,

".....Why do I always fall for the worthless ones... Kh..."

"Hey, wait. Why are you glaring at me?"

...Shortly after that I was out of the game too, and even Kobato, who we had keep going just to see if she could make it, finally met her end three turns later.

"...I should've known this would've been a horrible game, considering Meat of all people brought it..."

Yozora said with a tired look on her face, to which Sena didn't even object, and instead offered an honest apology.

"...Yeah... I'm, um, well... Sorry....."

And so, our first Neighbors Club activity since the school festival, *The Friend-Making Game DX* ended with all of us receiving some substantial psychological damage.

Incidentally, I did some research on *The Friend-Making Game DX* after I got home, and found that it had a ton of reviews saying stuff like "Forget friend-making, you'll lose friends with this shitty game

," and "Why would anyone even make such an awful game?" and " I'm sure the people who made it thought they did a good job, but... " mainly complaining about the game's balance problems and how depressing parts of it are.

If you add a few rules, change some of the instructions on the spaces, and change some of the items' effects, then it's probably not completely unplayable, so I suppose you could try playing it like that at your own risk if you're confident in the strength of your friendship. (Taken from an Amazones review)

Lunar Blade

It's now been a week since the end of the school festival, and the Neighbors Club was back to its typical, pre-festival, state as well, with the seven of us lazing around in the clubroom every day doing as we please.

Today, Yozora was reading a book on shogi with a serious look on her face.

Once in a while she'd go "Hmm..." and move her fingers as if she were moving the pieces on a board around, but I doubt she was actually playing air-shogi in her head. She was probably just trying to look cool.

Rika was busy rolling a die around with an air of seriousness about her.

This past week, Rika's engaged in this odd activity more than a few times.

When I asked her what on Earth she was doing, she gave me the cool answer of, "Practicing going against fate."

Apparently she wants to learn how to control the die after getting all those terrible rolls the other day when we all played *The Friend-Making Game* together. It'd be cool if she finds a way to do it, but I really doubt she will...

As for Kobato and Maria,

"One, two, three, TWO! Ugaaa!"

"Kukuku... One, two, three, ZERO! ...Muu!"

...They've been playing "One, two, three" (I don't know what it's actually called) for about an hour straight now.

The way it works is one player says "One, two, three, (some number)!" and then everyone puts out their hands with their thumbs either up or down, and if you guess the number of thumbs right you win that round.

If you win a round then you only use one hand from then on, and if you win again then you're done.

Everyone takes turns doing the "One, two three" call too.

It's a game you don't need any tools for, so you'll often see students playing it while they're waiting in line during gym class or something. ...Not that I've ever played it with any of my classmates before.

"Kukuku... Victory is mine...!"

"Muu, I'll win next time! One, two, three, THREE!! ...Ohh!? I did it! Ahahaha, I winnnn!"

"Fool... You still have one hand to go...! Oh great Akashic records, guide me! One, two, three, FOUR!! Kh..."

There's a bug in those Akashic records of yours, Kobato...

Maria won a round, meaning the most amount of thumbs possible is currently three, but neither Kobato nor Maria seemed to have realized that fact as Maria took her turn next and yelled, "One , two, three, THREE!!"

...Still, I can't believe they aren't bored of it yet...

I'm honestly a little impressed at how energetically they just keep going at it again and again without any sign of tiring.

Sometimes I'll even get jealous when I see other groups of friends playing this game, but at best it's just a silly little way to kill time. I never thought anyone could actually play it tens of times and actually enjoy it, but, well... I guess I was wrong...

Actually, just last week these two spent God knows how long playing tic-tac-toe together too. Their ability to just keep on playing games might be genius-level.

On the other hand, I was currently playing solitaire.

I got bored of it pretty quick way back when I first played it on our computer at home, but I was actually having a lot of fun playing it for the first time in a while, and with real cards, too.

Yukimura was standing expressionlessly behind me as she watched me play, and when my hands stopped moving every now and then she'd say, "Aniki, you can put a card here." and help me out.

Every time she pointed out a spot to me her chest would rub up against my shoulder too, but I did my best to feign ignorance.

...But yeah, in any case, ever since *The Friend-Making Game* analog games have gotten strangely popular with everyone in the Neighbors Club.

Aside from Sena, that is.

"Get out of my way you stupid background characters! I have to go see Kanami-chan!"

Sena was shooting down tons of pretty girls on her PS3.

...Just so we're clear, "shooting down" isn't a metaphor, I mean it literally. The game Sena's currently playing is an FPS where you have to use your gun to shoot down tons of girls coming at you with love letters in their hands and their panties in full view.

Sena's the whole reason for the analog game fad, but despite that she's only interested in digital games, as usual.

Guess it makes sense though, there aren't any analog galge after all.

I have no idea why we all gather in the clubroom together if we're all just gonna do our own stuff, but in any case time passed by peacefully.

This is our daily life here at the Neighbors Club.

But then, as if tearing that daily life apart,

"I've had it up to here with you people!!!!"

The door to the clubroom flew open with a bang along with a loud, lispy yell.

The person who'd just barged into our clubroom was a girl with spiky hair that made her look a bit like a small dog—— in other words, it was Aoi Yusa.

Yozora, Rika, Yukimura, Kobato, Maria and I all stopped what we were doing and looked over at our sudden intruder in surprise.

However Sena was different.

"Hang on! I'm at an important part right now!"

She was the only one who kept playing her game without so much as glancing at the clubroom entrance.

"Ahhnnn~♥" "S-stoooopp~♥" "Ahhhh~♥" "I-I'm cummingggg~♥

The girls on the screen continued to fall one after the other, each with their own high-pitched scream.

"Uu....."

Yusa and the rest of us all made awkward looks on our faces as we watched Sena keep playing for another minute until she finally cleared the stage.

"Phew~ New high score! Now I can get Kanami-chan's hidden swimsuit costume... Uheh♥"

After wiping her forehead with a big satisfied smile, Sena finally turned around, and said,

"So, what is it?"

Yusa looked pissed as she stared at Sena, trembling in anger.

"Fghh... S-Sena Kashiwazaki... How dare you mock me like this...!"

"...I don't think she's trying to mock you. That's just how she is..."

I tried to smooth things over, but the second after I did,

"? Who're you?"

Yusa's face went completely red after being faced with something you should never say to a classmate.

"I-I-I-I-I'm Aoi Yusa from your class! Class 2-3, the same as you! I'm seat number 33!!"

"Hmm..."

Sena walked up to Yusa at a brisk pace with a big ? over her head, and stared at her face intently.

"W-what is it..."

She continued staring at Yusa, whose face was still beet red, and then said,

"...Hmm... Now that you mention it you do kinda look familiar.."

"A-are you serious...!? We've talked plenty of times in class, and we even fought over who'd run the relay for our class at the athletics festival...!"

"I-I can't help it! I don't remember the faces of people I couldn't care less about! And wait, did we really fight over who'd run for our class?"

Sena launched yet another completely unwarranted rude remark at Yusa, who was almost in tears at this point.

"Fghh... J-Just how arrogant can you be...!? I admit I wasn't able to come anywhere near your run time, but I *am* as fast as Hamaguchi from the track club...!"

"D-don't take it too personally, all right...? This is just the kind of person she is..."

I said trying to calm Yusa down, who was now trembling in humiliation instead of anger.

"Uu... Hasegawa, you really are a nice person..."

"Huh? Kodaka, you know this girl?"

I said, "Yeah," and nodded in response to Sena's surprise before then asking,

"So, what is it Yusa? You need something from us?"

This prompted Yusa to quickly raise her face as if she'd just remembered something.

"T-that's right! Trying to crush my spirit with your preemptive attacks... How cowardly..."

Yusa then turned towards us and gave us all a sharp glare before yelling,

"What on Earth is with this club!? All you do is play around!"

...It's weird to have it pointed out after all this time, but she's right.

In response to her yelling,

"We just happen to be taking a break right now."

Yozora boldly said the above with a completely serious look on her face, as if she had not a single thing to feel guilty about.

In fact, she was so bold that even I felt compelled to agree with her that we're "just on a break" for a moment there.

"Huh...?" said Yusa as she winced away from Yozora, but she quickly recovered, and while shaking her head back and forth, she said,

"Y-your lies won't work on me!! I've been watching you all the whole week!!"

"...!?"

Yozora seemed a bit flustered after hearing that.

"I've been watching you since last Tuesday! And all you did on that Tuesday was play around! At first I thought you were just taking a day to relax after the festival, but you've been at it for a week now! Every single day you people just laaaaaze around here and play! You haven't done a single actual club activity! Actually, that game you played on the first day was probably the most I've seen you do the whole week! Aside from that you've all just been coming here and doing whatever you feel like all on your own!"

Yusa finished her long list of complaints without taking a single breath, and was now panting slightly, going "Hahh, Hahh..."

She's right too, we haven't done any club activities aside from *The Friend-Making Game* a week ago.

She really *was* watching us the whole week.

"So wait, why were you watching us in the first place?"

"I wanted to know what kind of stuff the club both you and Sena Kashiwazaki are in does! P-pursuing love my foot! You tricked me!"

"I-I suppose that's one way to look at it..."

I said as I awkwardly averted my gaze.

After I did,

"Phew..." Yozora let out a sigh, and then said a single word,

"...So?"

"...? W—— What?"

In response to Yusa's confusion, Yozora added,

"Assuming we *do* spend all day messing around doing as we please in here, how is that a problem?"

"W-what!? Of course it's a problem! Clubs are meant to allow students to better themselves in an effort to become fine students

befitting St. Chronica Academy! Coming to club just to laze around every day is out of the question!"

"Hrm... You may be right about that. However, every club has their own way of doing things. It's not something an outsider can comment on. What right do you have to come into other clubs and tell them what to do?"

"I'm a member of the Student Council! It's our duty to serve as role models for our fellow students, and to correct any students who stray from the right path!"

"Eh-"

Yozora winced at Yusa's confident declaration.

".....She's from the Student Council?"

Yozora glanced at me and asked in a tiny voice.

"Yeah," I said with a nod.

"That's right! I'm the Student Council treasurer, Aoi Yusa!" exclaimed Yusa, full of pride.

"I see..."

Yozora tried to act calm, but I could see a drop of sweat running down her cheek.

"...You asked what right I have, correct? Then I shall tell you! The Student Council's specific rights with regards to club activities

are as follows: drafting club budgets, granting special equipment to clubs with significant achievements, dispatching the cheer squad to matches and tournaments with other schools, organizing school rallies, and!—— we also have the right to submit formal requests to the school to have disciplinary action taken against problematic clubs, such as disbanding them or confiscating their rooms! Technically this is only the right to submit requests, however the school places a great deal of trust in us as representatives of the student body. It would be wise to assume any proper request made by the Student Council will be granted!"

"...Umm, h-hold on a sec."

Yozora said before grabbing my arm and dragging me away from Yusa.

"Hey, Kodaka! Why does the Student Council have their eyes on us!?"

Yozora asked in a tiny whisper.

"...Hmm, well, she sees Sena as her rival, and one thing led to another..."

"So it's Meat's fault...!!"

I got flustered after seeing how pissed Yozora looked, and added,

"Ah, no, it's my fault for making some up random crap and making her interested in the Neighbors Club..."

Who do we even blame for this anyway?

It's true I'm the straw that broke the camel's back, but the only reason I even know Yusa is because she thought I was Sena's boyfriend, and that all aside, the Student Council having their eyes on us is only a problem because of how fishy our club is...

"Tch, whatever!"

Yozora quickly said before returning to Yusa and telling her,

"The Neighbors Club is a perfectly legitimate club acknowledged by the school, and our activities are in line with our club's goals! There is not a single thing about our club's legitimacy to find fault with!"

Yozora's bold statement caused Yusa to falter a bit, but even so,

"Not a single thing...? T-there's no way that's true! All you do is play around!"

"To an outsider it may appear that way, but our 'playing around ' is a perfectly normal Neighbors club activity."

"Haa?"

Yusa looked bewildered as Yozora continued on flowingly.

"In the Neighbors Club, our goal is stated as: 'In accordance with the teachings of Christianity, we aim to become good

neighbors to our fellow students and deepen our fellowship with them by working together with them to better ourselves in a variety of situations.' and all of our club activities contribute to said goal."

I'm surprised she actually remembers that nonsense club description she made up...

It reminds me just how amazing Yozora's rote memorization skills are.

"Oh? Really?"

Sena said in a carefree tone of voice, causing Yozora to shoot a fierce glare at her to shut her up.

"I-I know, I saw that in the club activities database too, but what about it!?"

"...Hmph, you still don't get it? Playing board games, reading books, getting better at video games, all of it is to become good neighbors with our fellow students and deepen our fellowship with them. ...You want them too, don't you? A friend who'll always play with you, a friend who knows tons of stuff, a friend you can discuss the books you've read with, a friend who's good at video games, a friend who can help you in times of need——"

"Yeah, I want friends like that!!"

"You shut up!"

Sena got a flyswatter in the face after answering Yozora's question with sparkling eyes.

Yusa on the other hand, went "Ghh..." and groaned before saying,

"I-I don't play video games, and I only read books to study, but... I-I do think that friends like that would make life more enjoyable..."

She appeared reluctant, but in the end she agreed with Yozora.

"We here at the Neighbors Club spend each day working towards that wonderful goal, devoting ourselves to working with our peers to better ourselves."

"Wow, I never knew we had such a noble goalabyafu!?"

Sena seemed mildly impressed, but Yozora didn't even turn around as she smacked her with her flyswatter for being so oblivious to what was going on.

"Are we done now? Ms. member of the Student Council."

Yusa was clearly being pushed back by Yozora's fearless grin, but she still tried to argue back.

"E-even so, I still think it's a problem that it looks like all you're doing is playing around!"

"What it 'looks' like is just your opinion. Do you think it's acceptable for a member of the Student Council to criticize other students' club activities based solely on their opinion?"

"U-Uuu~"

Yusa looked like she was about to cry and her eyes started darting around after being faced with Yozora's cold stare.

Yozora's completely got the upper hand here.

"B-but! W-what about her!?"

Yusa pointed out in desperation... at Yukimura.

"...Me you ask?"

Yukimura tilted her head in confusion.

"And her too!"

She then pointed at Rika.

"Huh? What about Rika?"

"And those two, too!"

"Fueh!?"

Kobato hid behind me after being pointed at so suddenly.

"Y-you shouldn't be breaking school rules so brazenly!"

"...Breaking school rules?"

Yozora seemed puzzled, prompting an explanation from Yusa.

"Their clothes! Why aren't they in their uniforms!?"

...Yukimura was in her butler uniform, Kobato in her goth loli clothes, and Rika in some casual wear.

"Oh yeah, you're right...!"

I'd gotten so used to it that having it pointed out after all this time was almost impressive.

However, Yozora's confident expression didn't crumble.

"And? Is there a problem!"

"O-of course there is! St. Chronica Academy Student Information item number 5: Students attending St. Chronica Academy shall be required to wear the uniform specified by the school's regulations when coming to school, when leaving school, and when on the school premises!"

Wow... Did she seriously memorize all the school rules?

Yozora coolly responded to her,

"Exceptions to that rule are listed in item number 5, subsection 4 . One of those exceptions is during club activities."

"S-subsection 4...!?"

Yusa hurriedly pulled her student handbook out of her pocket, flipped through the pages and checked the rule Yozora mentioned.

"Let's see..... Uu..... Y-you're right, item number 5 subsection 4 has some exception listed... It says, 'Wearing a uniform is not required during gym class, club activities, or any special events such as school festivals and physicals." ...Fghh...!"

"Yozora, do you actually have all the school rules memorized...!?"

Yozora appeared uninterested as she exhaled through her nose at my surprise.

"Hmph... I read through them when I was bored and just happened to memorize them."

"Ghh... B-but, that exception assumes the student will be wearing gym clothes or some other sports uniform, I highly doubt it's there to allow you to wear whatever you want!"

"Go complain to whoever made the rules, not me. If you don't like it then submit a request for the rule to be revised and get it changed. If you do that we'll wear our uniforms during club as much as you want."

Yukimura made a light nod in agreement with Yozora.

"...Rika always wears casual clothes though, even outside of club."

Rika said with a faint smirk, to which I responded by whispering to her, "Shh! Don't rile her up any more than she already is."

"Kukuku... I am the Queen of the Exalted Night... The laws of mere humans cannot restrict me..." said Kobato.

"That's 'cause you're in the middle school division."

Middle school division!?

Yusa caught my comment with her sharp ears. Crap.

"W-why is a middle school student part of your club!?"

"Hyau!?"

Kobato flinched after being glared at by Yusa.

"...There's no rule that says middle school students can't be club members. In fact, there aren't any rules about who can join a club at all."

Yozora calmly refuted Yusa's objection.

However this time Yusa wasn't backing down.

"Outsiders are banned from entering school buildings! Also, in section 8 of the Student Council Regulations, 'Club Regulations', it says that club members must actively participate in club activities!"

"? The latter is a rule banning so-called 'ghost members,' right? It's vague as to what counts as active, but anyway... what about it?"

Yusa made a triumphant smile at Yozora's question, and said,

"In other words, if we consider both of these rules together, it means that it's against the rules for someone who will have a hard time just showing up to a club to join said club!"

"Oh yeah...?" Yozora seemed a tad impressed, and then said,

"True, you're exactly right. I cannot deny the possibility that letting outsiders join a club may be a violation of the school rules."

"E-Exactly!"

Kobato, still standing behind me, went "Uuu..." as she let out a weak moan.

"But, does a student from the middle school division even count as an 'outsider' in the first place!?"

Yozora asked in a firm tone of voice.

"Wha...!?"

"The school rules do not provide any definition for the term ' outsider,' however from a common-sense point of view, we can assume 'outsider' holds the dictionary definition of 'a person not belonging to a particular group.' While she may be in the middle school division, she is still a fine St. Chronica Academy student, and on top of that one of her relatives is a club member. Don't you think it's unreasonable to call someone like her an 'outsider?'"

"Ugfh...!"

"Furthermore,"

"T-there's more!?"

"...This chapel is on school grounds, however it is not a 'school building,' it's a public facility. There are lots of schools in the world that restrict outsiders from coming onto school grounds, but our school is not one of them."

"Yeah, I mean lots of the old ladies from the neighborhood come here to jog and walk their dogs and stuff..." I added.

"Hence, I hereby declare there is no problem at all with Kodaka Hasegawa's little sister being a member of the Neighbors Club!"

Yozora declared in a voice that rang through the clubroom.

"...And that's that. Good to hear, isn't it? Kobato."

Kobato went, "Yeah..." and made a small nod as I gently rubbed her head. ...Is it just my imagination, or is she looking at Yozora with a weird sparkle in her eyes?

"Ugffh...!"

Yusa glared at Yozora as she groaned in frustration, and then said,

"I... I... I..."

"I?"

"I won't forget thisssss!!

She then ran out of the clubroom screaming with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"...Hmph, don't ever come back here again, damn dog of the Student Council."

Yozora said, spitting out the words full of irritation.

"A superb job as always, Yozora-anego."

Yukimura said, looking at Yozora with a look of respect.

"Good job swatting the fly away!"

Said Sena in her usual condescending tone.

"Hmph, that was too ea-..."

Yozora started to respond to Sena, but then stumbled all of a sudden and plopped down into a chair.

She then went, "Phewwwwwwww..." and let out a huge sigh.

"Yozora, what's wrong!?"

"...I get nervous talking to people I don't know..."

Yozora answered, seemingly dead tired after dealing with Yusa.

"...That Yusa woman kept staring right at my eyes when she talked to me... How can she do that so naturally with someone she's only just met... It's scary..."

Maybe it was because she wasn't nervous anymore, but Yozora let what she was actually thinking slip out, and then having realized what she'd just done, started blushing as she faced down towards the ground.

It looked like she'd won with ease, but I guess dealing with Yusa was actually pretty hard on her.

"...Was the reason you were so aggressive with Yusa... because you were panicking...?"

"N-no, it's not like that..."

I couldn't help but smile after seeing Yozora's face go even redder after saying that.

"W-what are you smiling for, Kodaka!? A-a-a-and you guys too!"

Yozora got angry with us as we all looked at her with smiles on our faces.

"Aha, Yozora's blushing! Sooo cuuute!"

"Meat...! This was all your fault in the first place...!"

...In any case, the Neighbors Club was saved thanks to Yozora.

"Good job, President."

"Nn... I'm exhausted... We would've been in trouble if this school's rules weren't so lax..."

Yozora said, and then made a gentle smile.

Later that night.

I pulled out three of my old student handbooks from schools I'd gone to before, and compared them to St. Chronica Academy's rules.

Yozora was right, overall St. Chronica Academy's rules were a lot more lax than other schools.

They remade the rules when the school was changed from an all-girls one to a co-ed one 15 years ago, and even after going co-ed no real problems ever came up that would've caused them to change the school rules, so that's probably why they're still so lax. There was actually another high school that had the steep requirement of 60 signatures and 10 members before you could make a club.

If St. Chronica Academy had that rule, Yozora would've never been able to make the Neighbors Club.

It reminds me—— just how much of a miracle this all is.

Incidentally, there were also rules like "Climbing snowy mountains is forbidden." and "Driving a motorcycle onto the track is forbidden."

...That school must've had a student who got stranded on a snowy mountain and a student who drove his motorcycle on the track...

I spent the next little while reading through the handbooks, reminiscing about the schools I used to go to——

Dancing Mad

It was now the next day, after school.

The seven of us were playing around just like yesterday when all of a sudden Yusa came flying into the room yet again.

"I've got you this time!!"

"...You again?"

Yozora frowned with a look of utter irritation.

"Fghh...!"

Yusa directed a menacing glance at Yozora, perhaps because she'd realized Yozora was not someone to be taken lightly, and then, brimming with confidence, she yelled,

"J-just wait until you hear this!"

"Hear what?"

"I found an undeniable reason why your club should not be allowed!"

"Hmph, save me your babbling..."

Yozora acted calm, but I could tell she was shaken a bit by Yusa's overwhelming confidence.

"So, what's this reason you found?"

I asked, prompting Yusa to take out her student handbook and flip it open.

"Student Information item number 12, subsection 2, regulations regarding extracurricular activities! Activities conducted in organizations such as clubs must be led by an instructor in order to be approved! In addition, Student Council Regulations item number 77! All clubs must have at least one advisor assigned to them!

.....?

We all had question marks over our heads.

"In other words, you need an advisor to make a club, right? We have one..... technically."

I said, after which everyone looked over at the Neighbors Club advisor—— at Maria Takayama, sitting on the couch munching away at her potato chips.

"Fueh?"

Maria gave us all a blank stare.

Yusa then continued on, saying,

"It's your advisor that's the problem!"

"...What do you mean?" asked Yozora.

"Student Council Regulations item 78, A club's advisor must be an instructor or staff member employed at St. Chronica Academy!"

"Umm... So what you're trying to say is, an advisor can't be a sister, they have to be a teacher?"

"No, that's wrong Kodaka." replied Yozora.

"Sisters are dispatched from the church, and strictly speaking they are not members of this school. However, St. Chronica Academy School Regulations item 24, 'Regulations regarding sisters', subsection 2 states that, 'Unless otherwise specified, sisters dispatched to St. Chronica Academy have the same privileges and duties as those of an instructor.' In other words, sisters have the same authority as teachers, and in fact there are several clubs besides ours who have a sister as their advisor. I even checked to make sure having a sister as an advisor was OK when I was doing the paperwork to make our club."

"Wow..."

Yozora's flowing explanation was honestly impressive. ...But seriously, just how much free time do you have to have to memorize the school rules for both students and teachers?

In response to Yozora's confident reply, Yusa said,

"...Yes, it's true that sisters are allowed to be advisors. However..."

She then made a bold smile, and declared,

"Maria Takayama **is not a sister**!"

"""""""""?"""""""""

We all tilted our heads.

What the heck is she talking about?

Even Maria didn't seem to have a clue what Yusa was going on about.

"I looked it up, and there was no sister by the name of Maria Takayama recorded in the list of sisters here at this school."

"...Huh?"

"...Her older sister, Kate Takayama-sensei, was on the list, but Maria Takayama's name was not listed in the staff roster. In other words, she has no job here at this school! She simply comes to the chapel a lot as Kate Takayama-sensei's relative. Basically, she's just **a little girl wearing a sister uniform**!"

.....Eh, seriously?

The entire Neighbors Club was shocked into silence.

"...I *did* think it was weird a little girl like her was a teacher, but.."

Rika quietly said to herself. Eh, you bring that up *now*?

Yozora then tried to refute Yusa's claim.

"B-but! My club creation request was officially accepted without a single problem! If Maria wasn't really a sister then it should've been rejected!"

"Somebody just made a mistake. The sisters dispatched here from the church are independent from the school, so someone probably just happened to miss it. You can check if you want though, I brought the roster with me."

Yusa's composed tone of voice made it hard to believe she was bluffing. I doubt she'd tell a lie we could prove wrong so easily.

"......So, this school's lax attitude towards clubs backfired on me, is that it...!?"

Yozora ground her teeth in frustration.

Just then, Maria quietly asked with an expressionless face,

"...I'm... not a sister...?"

"H-hold on, I'm gonna check!"

I hurriedly whipped out my phone and called Kate.

"Onii-chan!?"

Kate asked in a happy voice.

"...Yeah."

"Aha, I can't believe Onii-chan is calling me! I'm so happy! What do you need!?"

"There's something I wanna ask you."

"Hmm? What is it? Sounds serious."

"...About Maria... is she a sister?"

"Huh? No."

"That's it!?"

She confirmed it like it was absolutely nothing at all...

".....For real?"

"For real. Why?"

"......Eh... Then why does Maria work at the school?"

"I figured it'd be a good experience for her, and I don't wanna have her sitting around at home all day, so I make her help me. It's not like she can get a part-time job at her age..... I can keep my eye on her if she's at school with me too..."

Her voice seemed to have a tinge of regret and sadness in it.

I'm sure they've been through their fair share of stuff, but now's not the time for that.

"...Then why does Maria always say she's a teacher...?"

"Ahh, that's just her making stuff up. I always tell her 'a real teacher would do it' 'cause that gets her to actually do some work, and somewhere along the way she started thinking she's an actual teacher, I guess."

"Wha...!? ...B-but it *is* true that she's in charge of lounge #4, right !? You have to be a real teacher to-"

"Hm? Officially I'm the one in charge of that room. I did lend Maria the key on the promise that she'd keep it clean though."

No way... So she's not even in charge of the clubroom...

"...Why does she even wear that sister uniform then...?"

"Because it's cute!!"

"What."

"Ah, no, I mean, um... Having her wear it makes people think she's a sister and not just some kid roaming around the school, right?"

"Y-You know we're in huge trouble right now because of that!!"

"Huh!?"

I could tell Kate was surprised after hearing that.

I then quickly hung up on her in irritation, and told everyone else as they stared at me in silence,

"...I just checked with Maria's older sister. Apparently Maria isn't a sister."

.....

After a period of silence, everyone's eyes naturally found their way to Maria.

"......I see... So I was never really a sister..."

Maria's eyes were blank like those of a dead fish.

It was like the core of her identity had just been smashed.

"...How to say this... I'm sorry for saying I was a teacher and a disciple of God and acting so full of myself... I shouldn't have lied to you all like that..."

"M-Maria..."

Yozora's expression clouded over.

"Hahh... I see... Just what the heck am I then..."

"Au..."

Even Yusa made an uncomfortable look on her face after seeing how depressed Maria was.

However, she quickly shook her head back and forth as if to tell herself now wasn't the time for that, and said,

"A-anyway, you get it now, don't you!? The Neighbors Club cannot be recognized as an official club seeing as how it does not have an advisor! In fact, given that the club was made improperly, it will likely face a fittingly severe punishment! Don't forget that!"

"S-severe punishment...?"

Yozora asked nervously.

"I mean it will be **disbanded** of course!"

"Disbanded...!"

We all started to panic.

Yusa looked at us full of satisfaction as she continued on.

"If you have a problem with that, then become fine students befitting our school and——"

However right in the middle of Yusa's posturing,

"So Maria just needs to be our official advisor, that it?"

Sena opened her mouth and cut Yusa off with a voice that didn't have a hint of nervousness in it, despite the fact that we're currently in danger of being disbanded.

"S-Sena Kashiwazaki..."

Yusa twitched as she cowered away from Sena.

"Y-yes, but the whole point is that she isn't, were you even listening!?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of...? Gununu...!"

"Hmm... Alright, just hold on a sec."

Sena took out her cellphone as if it were a huge pain, and walked outside of the clubroom.

Yusa looked bewildered as she glanced all around the clubroom , but we were just as confused about what to do next as she was.

"...Want some coffee or something for now?"

I had Yusa sit down in a seat as Yukimura prepared some coffee .

Yusa stared deeply at the coffee placed in front of her.

"Relax, it's not poisoned or anything."

I'd intended it to be a simple joke to lighten the mood, but for some reason Yukimura made an incredibly serious look on her face and said,

"I am such a fool... forgive me."

"Huh? Why're you apologizing?"

"There was a chance to dispose of this ruffian right under my nose, and I missed it..."

"Dispose of!?"

"R-relax, it was just a joke! Y-Yukimura your jokes are too intense, hahaha..."

I hurriedly tried to cover things up and soothe Yusa's shock.

"I have no excuse for my failure, Aniki."

"Oh, I see... You tell some pretty scary jokes..."

Yukimura made a small bow as Yusa continued to direct a look of vigilance towards her. Yusa then asked me,

"...U-umm, could I please have some milk and sugar? Hasegawa ."

"Sure thing."

I grabbed the milk and sugar she'd asked for so timidly and brought it over to her.

She put it all in and stirred the coffee nervously before bringing it to her mouth.

"...Ugh..."

You put all that in and it's still too bitter? Seriously?

The entire Neighbors Club watched Yusa with complicated looks on their faces, except for Yozora, who was glaring at her with clear hostility.

Yusa was definitely the away team here after coming to pick a fight with us and saying she'd disband our club, and on top of that she was all alone in what you might as well call enemy territory.

I have to admit though, she's got guts for staying here despite the fact that she's obviously scared. Most people would've run away as soon as they could.

About 10 minutes passed without anyone saying a single word.

"I'm back, foolish commoners!"

Sena finally returned to the clubroom, allowing all of us, Yusa included, to breathe a sigh of relief.

Sena proceeded to completely ignore the awkward atmosphere in the room, and then triumphantly declared,

"Maria is now scheduled to become a **special temporary lecturer**!"

...What?

It was so sudden that we all just stood there with our jaws open.

"The official paperwork isn't done yet, but you're okay with it, right?" Sena asked Maria.

"What's a... special temporary lecturer?"

"I don't really know either, but apparently it's like being a teacher."

"...Who did you call?"

I asked, to which Sena replied,

"Papa, why?"

"So it was the chairman...!"

Pegasus Kashiwazaki → Chairman of St. Chronica Academy → chairman of a private school = highest authority at that school.

"So yeah, I asked him what the fastest way to make Maria an official advisor was, and he said this was the best. Of course, we need her approval first though. You okay with it Maria?"

Maria stared at Sena with her eyes open wide.

"...I can be a real teacher?"

"Yeah."

"Okay! I'll do it!"

"I see. I'll have them do the paperwork then."

"Ohhhh! Doing the paperwork! Ahahaha! Yayyyy! Yayyyy! I'm gonna be a real teacher! Ahahahahaha!!"

Maria was bouncing all around like a ball of happiness.

Our guest, on the other hand,

"T-that's... That's ridiculous!"

Yusa yelled at Sena.

Sena didn't seem to care much though, and told her,

"It was decided by this school's chairman. Got a problem with that?"

"O-of course I do! E-even if Maria Takayama does become an official advisor, it doesn't change the fact that the Neighbors Club was created incorrectly, thus-"

"Shut up, mongrel."

Sena looked down at Yusa, still trying to argue, with a stare like that of a merciless goddess.

"Eep..."

Yusa curled herself up like a small frightened dog.

"...Just so we're clear, even if you do put in a request for the Neighbors Club to be disbanded, I can have that crushed too. I did exactly what you said and made Maria an advisor to try and let you save face, since you're a classmate and all. You should be thanking me."

"T-thanking you...!? How arrogant can you be...!? I-I will never accept such cowardly tactics!"

"I couldn't care less."

Sena let out an irritated sigh, and then brought her face right next to Yusa's.

"...Listen up, mongrel. This club is *mine*. You know what I do to dogs who won't stop their annoying barking in my garden...? **I crush them.**"

"Hya... A-auu..."

"...Let's see... Maybe I should have you expelled so you can never come and do this stupid shit ever again?"

"T-there's no way you can do th——"

"Just try me."

"...U... Uu... Ex... pelled.....?"

Yusa continued to glare at Sena with teary eyes for a short while , but eventually she said,

"...I apologish for disturbing you. I won't bother the Neighbors Club ever again..... *sniff*"

She then left the clubroom with a face that looked like she was about to burst into tears.

After Yusa had left, Maria jumped onto Sena and hugged her full of energy.

"Yayyy! I'm a teacher now thanks to Sena~! Thanks Sena! Ahahahaha!"

"I-it's not like I did it for you..."

Sena said, and not in a tsundere way either. She seemed honestly annoyed by Maria as she tried to push her away.

"Hmph... A little rich girl using her authority as a shield to beat her opponents... If this were a manga you'd be the villain for sure."

Yozora said in a slightly accusatory way, causing Sena's face to go red.

"I-I don't like doing things this way either! But Papa told me before, 'Don't hesitate to use your authority if the need arises'..."

Um, Mr. Pegasus, what are you teaching your daughter...?

"Ahh, come on, it doesn't even matter anyway!"

Sena declared before cheerfully trotting to the other end of the clubroom and resuming her game that Yusa's arrival had interrupted.

She was playing the same game as yesterday, the FPS about shooting down groups of pretty girls.

"Hehehe~♥ Today I'm finally gonna get my favorite girl, Kaoru-chan's white bunny ear bikini! I've gotta get through Kaoru-chan's super hard route without taking any damage at all. This is gonna be tough, even for me... But I'm gonna do it...! Slurp...! Uheh..."

We all looked at Sena grinning and licking her lips like some kind of disgusting bug.

"...Sena-senpai, did you... threaten that person so much just because you wanted to get back to your game as fast as possible?"

Rika asked with a cold sweat running down her cheek.

"Obviously!"

Sena vigorously replied without even turning around, rapidly mashing the buttons on her controller.

"Sena-anego is truly unshakable."

Yukimura seemed to be strangely impressed for some reason.

So Yusa means less to Sena than some video game character's white bunny ear bikini, huh...

I gotta admit I feel a bit sorry for her.

"...Anyway, I couldn't care less about someone who'd back down just because I flashed a bit of my authority. People with real backbone wouldn't even give it a second thought."

Sena quietly whispered as if talking to herself.

Rika, Yukimura, Kobato, and Maria all tilted their heads in confusion.

Yozora was the only one who went, "Heh..." and made a tiny smile.

Seeing Yozora smile like that reminded me of the day Sena first came to the Neighbors Club.

"It's her fault for having such a shitty personality. Commoners are supposed to kneel before the perfection that is me."

"At least I'm not a retard like you."

"Heheh, I'm number one in our grade!"

"Oh wow, cow-tits can study, you're soooo amazing~"

"...You little... I'll have Papa expel you!"

"Hah, Papa? Aren't you embarrassed to go running to mommy and daddy at your age? Little babies like you who still need to be breast fed are so annoying. Aren't you ashamed to be alive?"

"...Gh...! Y-you're a total bitch, you know that...!"

.....They really did hate each other so much you'd never believe they'd just met.

We made the Neighbors Club in the middle of June, so it's been about five months now.

Our battle with Aoi Yusa could've led to the destruction of the Neighbors Club, and yet Yozora and Sena, the two girls who've done nothing but fight these past five months, ended it with ease.

——Yozora Mikadzuki, a girl with a quick mind and a sharp tongue.

——Sena Kashiwazaki, a girl with an overwhelming amount of power, gifted in athletics, intelligence, wealth, and authority.

As long as we have these two, I doubt anyone could defeat the Neighbors Club.

That carefree thought passed through my mind.

I forgot about the fragile balance our current situation was built upon, and simply felt relieved at having overcome our latest crisis.

I believed that these carefree days with the Neighbors Club would go on forever.

...What happened next was not because I let myself think that way—— it was not because I let my guard down.

Just as a single human cannot affect the orbit of a planet, neither could my will have stopped reality from mercilessly marching on.

"This is how I feel about you!" "Ahhh, Ouiiiiii!" "Go out with me !" "I love you, Onii-chan!" "D-don't get the wrong idea, I don't care about you at all!"

The girls on the screen held love letters overhead like some kind of weapon and shot heart-shaped beams out of their eyes as they approached the protagonist.

"I will nyot diiiiieee!!" "UNIVERRRRRSE!!" "Je t'aiiiime!!"

As I was watching the game and thinking about how there are some weird galge out there, and about how it looks kinda fun to play,

"...Oh yeah. Hey, Kodaka."

"S-shtooppppp!" "P-please marry me!" "N-not therrrree!" " Ahhhhnnnn!" "C'est si bon!" "Not even my dad has groped me before!"

Sena casually called out to me while defeating girl after girl while moving her fingers across her controller at an astonishing speed.

"Hmm?" I replied with an equally casual and carefree tone.

"It came up when I was talking with Papa just now, but you know,"

"Yeah?"

"You should marry me after all."

Both Yozora and Rika went "Bfuah!" and spit out their coffee simultaneously.

Yukimura, Maria, and Kobato all looked stunned.

"I've been thinking about it for a long time now, and well~"

"Ecstasyyyyyyy!" "I'm cummingggggg!" "Higiiiiiiii!"

Sena kept staring at the screen with a serious look on her face, and continued on without so much as glancing back at me.

"Ahhhhh!!" "You jerrrk♥" "Y-you're so roughhhh!"

"I said this before, but the promise our dads made, or the fact that we met when we were little doesn't matter. But, it's only the promise itself that doesn't matter. When we talked about it before it was kinda like we just canceled the whole marriage thing entirely, but promise aside, I really do feel like I want to marry you . I mean, after all,

I love you, Kodaka."

"Eh, what'd you say!?"

"Ahya!?"

BAM.

Yelling at the top of my lungs to crush Sena's words made her to mess up in her game, causing the protagonist to take damage from a panty bomb thrown by one of the girls on the screen.

"Nghagghhhhh! Come on! You made me screw up you idiot!!"

Sena yelled in frustration and turned around to glare at me with tears in the corners of her eyes.

"A-ah, yeah, my bad... So, what'd you say?"

I tried to make a wry smile to feign ignorance, but the best I could pull off was an obviously strained fake smile.

"Don't give me that, I sai——"

Sena froze with her mouth half-open when she realized we were all staring at her

"............Auu."

After a brief silence, Sena's face flared up into a bright red.

Looks like she finally realized she just blurted out something utterly outrageous like it was nothing while she was absorbed in playing her game.

"...Ah—— Uhh, auu... Umm..."

Sena's mouth was opening and closing like a fish, her face still bright red.

What do I do? I need to say something...

However it was all so sudden that I couldn't organize my thoughts.

"...G-guess I said it... Aha..."

Sena made an awkward dry smile, and said,

"......Ahaha... Well, whatever... I was gonna say it sooner or later anyway..."

She decided to go with it.

Sena then started squirming as she stared at me with upturned eyes.

"...S-so, um, yeah... That's how it is... Aha..."

"...S-so, um, yeah...
That's how it is... Aha..."

告白

The way Sena kept on smiling through her embarrassment was so cute it should be illegal.

Her cuteness was so strong it was like magic. It had such an undeniable force to it that nearly any guy would fall for her no questions asked.

If I didn't know her, if Sena Kashiwazaki was just a stranger to me, I might've said yes and hugged her right then and there.

But, I couldn't do that.

"......U-uhh... W-what do you mean? I couldn't hear what you said over your game's noise, haha..."

It was a barefaced lie.

And the mood in the room didn't change one bit.

...Of course it wouldn't.

So long as Sena has no intention of playing dumb, no amount of playing dumb on my part will work.

Sena completely ignored what I'd said, and continued staring at me with moist eyes.

I looked away from Sena, and started looking all around the clubroom.

Yozora looked like she was clueless as to what to do next, and kept alternating between looking at Sena and at me.

Yukimura was staring at me intently with her usual emotionless expression.

Maria was eating potato chips with a puzzled look on her face.

Kobato stared at me with a face that looked like she was about to cry.

Rika kept looking at both Sena and me with a pained expression on her face, and when our eyes met she sighed as if to say, 'I told you this would happen.'

"...Kodaka?"

Sena cutely tilted her head to the side.

If she was doing it on purpose that'd make her incredibly sly, but Sena isn't the kind of person to do stuff like that. She has no need to.

Each and every one of Sena's gestures has the power to draw people to her, and right now they were all being focused on me.

I thought about what to do.

I searched for a way to avoid being swallowed up by her explosive charm and smoothly dodge the question so that nothing would change and we could act like it never happened.

I reached my answer in an instant. It's impossible.

I can't think of a way to solve this, and even if there was a way, it'd be impossible for me.

If I had the social skills to dodge a problem of this caliber I'd be a hyper normal right now, and I wouldn't even be here, in the Neighbors Club, in the first place.

Thus, I took my bag in hand, got up,

"I-I just remembered I've got some stuff to do!"

and ran away.

A New Light

After running out of the clubroom the weekend quickly passed by, and it was now Monday after school.

As I was walking through the halls with heavy steps, I saw Aoi Yusa a ways off walking in my direction.

She was carrying two cardboard boxes and looked really unsteady on her feet.

The boxes looked pretty heavy, and she was wearing a pretty stern expression as she carried them.

The boxes made it so she couldn't see in front of her very well, and it wasn't until she was about a meter away that she realized it was me, causing her to go "Ah..." and make an awkward face.

Yusa averted her gaze and quickly tried to pass by me.

"Awa!?"

However, all of a sudden she tripped over her own feet and lost her balance.

"Uoh!?"

I reflexively grabbed both boxes with my hands and held them steady, allowing Yusa to regain her balance.

"Phew... T-thank you, Hasegawa. I-if you'll excuse me!"

"Hey, wait!"

I called out to Yusa as she tried to quickly get away from me, and asked her,

"...Want some help?"

"I-I'm fi—— Owah, ah?"

Yusa was right in the middle of refusing my offer when she tripped again, almost dropping the top box. All I could do was sigh at her.

"...You can't even see where you're going. It's dangerous——"

I said before snatching the top box.

"——Uwoah!?"

However it was heavier than I thought it'd be, causing me to let out a yelp in a panicked voice.

Most girls would probably have a hell of a time trying to carry two of these at once... Hell, some guys might even have trouble carrying two.

"T-thank you Hasegawa..."

Yusa thanked me while blushing faintly.

"Don't sweat it."

I said, and then started walking alongside Yusa.

"These are pretty heavy... what's in 'em?"

"Request forms and printouts used during the school festival. There's some pamphlets and such in here too."

"Ahh, paper huh. No wonder it's heavy... What were you thinking, carrying two of these at once?"

"I-I couldn't help it, there's a lot of them I have to move! —— Uwo!"

Even with only one box Yusa still looked unsteady on her feet.

"...Are you OK?"

"Y-yes..."

Yusa seemed embarrassed as she nodded at me.

"So if you have a lot, does that mean there's still more after these two?"

"Yes."

"Why are you even carrying these in the first place?"

"It's part of my Student Council duties."

"You have to carry all of them by yourself?"

"Yes."

"How can they make one person carry so many of these alone..."

"T-that's not it!"

Yusa hurriedly interjected upon hearing my accusatory tone.

"It's not like everyone else in the Student Council pushed this onto me. It's the opposite actually, I turned down their offer to help."

"How come?"

"Because it's my fault for skipping a week of work that things got this backed up. I can't bother everyone else with this when they're already so busy."

Yusa plainly stated with a super serious look on her face.

That week she skipped... is probably the time she spent observing what we were doing in the Neighbors Club.

And apparently this is the work that piled up in that time.

"...Hey, Yusa."

"Yes?"

"...Why did you try so hard to get rid of the Neighbors Club?"

I asked her something that'd been on my mind.

First she came and complained we weren't following school rules, and when that failed she went so far as checking the staff roster just to find something we did wrong.

And that's all despite the fact that the Neighbors Club hasn't ever caused any real problems.

The fact we spend all of our time playing around is probably an issue, but I'm pretty sure there are plenty of clubs besides ours who don't do much.

If it was just about the school rules, then there are plenty of other students who aren't following them. In fact, I'd be surprised if you could find even one person who follows all the school rules to a T.

There's also the fact that the time I first met Yusa she actually complimented my clothes and hair and such because she thought I was doing all that to be fashionable.

Even if she is a ridiculously serious hard worker, I don't think she's an inflexible stubborn person at all.

And yet, she focused on the Neighbors Club to the point that it caused problems with her own work, and even tried to have the club disbanded.

I'm not sure how to put it exactly, but it just doesn't seem like something she'd do.

"I did it because people with amazing skills should be in a place that suits those skills."

Yusa plainly answered.

"...A place that suits their skills?"

"Yes! It is a great loss to all of mankind to have a person as gifted as Sena Kashiwazaki wasting her time in such a place!"

"To all of mankind, huh..."

I said while making a wry smile, and then asked,

"...So, basically, you were trying to get rid of the Neighbors Club for Sena's sake?"

"Yes!" Yusa immediately replied.

"I see..."

Looking at it from an objective point of view—— I'm sure Yusa is right.

Whether or not it's something that affects all of mankind aside, I'm sure Sena could achieve some great things in a sports club.

She might be fatally uncooperative, but it'd be fine as long as she did solo events, and even for team events her specs are so high it balances out her faults and then some.

And Sena isn't the only one in the Neighbors Club like that.

Yozora Mikadzuki is amazing at both academics and sports.

She's bad at socializing, but it's not like she can't fit into a group at all, and I'm sure she'd be able to handle just about anything you throw at her.

Needless to say there's Rika Shiguma as well, who's already done actual professional work.

I bet tons of people would love to have her spend her free time helping them research and invent things. In fact, there's probably more people who'd want her than there are who'd want Sena.

Kobato Hasegawa is popular in her middle school—— She has a place she belongs outside the Neighbors Club.

She should value the bonds she has with her classmates, so she can be ready for when she eventually graduates and becomes a high school student.

Maria Takayama has an older sister at her side who loves her more than anyone else.

Even if she didn't have the Neighbors Club, I'm sure her sister would protect her and guide her right this time.

As for Yukimura Kusunoki, she claims "I do not need friends." and thus completely denies the idea of "making friends" at the heart of the Neighbors Club.

A shiver ran through my body and caused all my hair to stand on end.

If you think about it logically,

the Neighbors club has no reason to,

no reason to...

"Just kidding, that was a lie."

Yusa said with a sigh just before my brain could form that final terrifying word.

"Huh? A lie?"

"...It would've been nice if I had a cool reason like doing it for the world, or for someone else, or for society, or for justice, but... that's not why I did it. Honestly, I didn't think about doing it for her at all."

"...What do you mean?"

Yusa made a self-derisive smile at my question.

"I just wanted to beat Sena Kashiwazaki. I wanted to show the queen who has everything that not everything will go her way. ... Basically, I was jealous. I wanted someone blessed like her to pay a fitting price. If you're more blessed than others, **then you should suffer an equal amount**. Otherwise it'd be unfair. If there are people who are born with everything and get to be happy no matter what, then what about the normal people out there trying their best every single day?"

Yusa then paused and went, "Hahhhhhhhhhhhhhh~~" and let out a big sigh.

"...But, trying to harass Sena Kashiwazaki only ended up making me look more pathetic... I even caused trouble for you too, Hasegawa. I'm sorry."

Yusa seemed to truly regret her actions as she apologized to me.

Honestly, I don't think playing the bad guy suits her in the least.

"You don't have to worry about us, what's done is done... And besides, I kinda know what you mean..."

"I appreciate it, even if it is just a lie."

Yusa said with an apologetic look on her face.

I wasn't lying though. After all, what's wrong with being jealous of others?

"...Oh, also,"

There was something more important than her apology I needed to tell her.

"...You're wrong about thinking that Sena has everything. There are things that even she doesn't have."

"Oh? Just what doesn't she have then?"

"...Friends, for example."

"Ahaha."

Yusa made a big grin after hearing my completely serious answer.

"W-why are you laughing?"

Yusa looked like she'd just heard something hilarious as she said,

"Aha, you've got as good a sense of humor as always, Hasegawa~ **As if there's anybody who doesn't have any friends! Good joke though! Pfft, haha!**"

"**……**Y-yeah, guess you're right, haha**…**"

"Thank you very much, Hasegawa! I appreciate you telling such a funny joke to try and cheer someone like me up! You're a really nice and wonderful person!"

She made a sweet smile, and I could see that her walking wasn't as labored as it was before.

"....."

.....It's good to see she's back to her usual self again, but... for some reason I feel kinda depressed right now...

Yusa and I left the school building, and carried the boxes all the way out to a shed tucked away in a corner of the school grounds.

Inside the shed there were bunches of folded up cardboard boxes, stacks of printer paper, newspapers, and books all separated into their own little areas.

I've heard that all the paper garbage in St. Chronica Academy goes here, and that once a month they send it out to be recycled.

I took all the paper out of my cardboard box, broke it up into smaller stacks, then tied it up with some vinyl rope and placed it in the designated area.

I folded up the cardboard box too, and placed it on top of the other folded up boxes.

Just one box alone was quite a bit of work.

"Thank you very much, Hasegawa. You were a big help."

Yusa said with a smile while wiping the sweat off of her forehead.

She then told me,

"I'll be fine now, you can go to your club."

"...!"

My heart felt like it was about to jump out of my chest at the mention of the word "club".

"You've still got more to carry, don't you? I'll help with those too."

I said, trying my best to act calm.

"Huh?"

Yusa looked confused for a moment, and then said,

"Y-you don't have to do that! This is all work I should be doing!"

"Don't worry about it. In for a penny in for a pound."

"B-but there are still quite a few left..."

"Then all the more reason for me to help. Can't just abandon you, now can I?"

That was, without a doubt, what I honestly thought.

I'd feel bad if I left a little girl like her (even if she is the same age as me) to do all this heavy lifting by herself.

"But it doesn't even have anything to do with you, I'd feel bad making you help..."

"This is all work that piled up while you were observing the Neighbors Club, right? Then it does have something to do with me ."

It's also true that I felt a bit guilty about making Yusa waste all that time.

"You... think so...?"

After mulling it over for a few moments, Yusa made a cheerful smile and said,

"Okay, then I'll take you up on your offer. Thank you very much, Hasegawa!"

"...But is it really okay if you don't go to your club?"

I did my best to sound casual as I responded to Yusa's hesitant question.

"You should know by now that the Neighbors Club doesn't have any specific activities. If we have other stuff to do then we're free to do that stuff instead."

That is also the truth.

The seven of us might've started gathering more frequently lately, but it wasn't too long ago that hardly anyone ever showed up.

People would be absent for any number of reasons you'd never get away with in a normal club, whether it be because they wanted to buy a new book, wanted to play a new video game, wanted to do their homework, etc.

In fact, sometimes the only reason would be that they didn't feel like it, and on top of that they wouldn't even tell anyone they weren't coming. To tell the truth, I've actually done that on more than one occasion myself.

Thus, "helping the Student Council" was just the reason I needed.

It was a perfect reason, one nobody could fault me for.

.....

...Why have I been going out of my way to mention "this is the truth" and "that was what I really thought" for the past little while now?

...Why was I looking for "a reason I can't go the Neighbors Club "?

...Who am I making excuses to?

.....The answer is obvious.

I didn't want to admit that, even if it was just for a split second, that I thought to myself, "I don't want to go to the Neighbors Club. "

Yusa and I made three more trips back and forth, carrying the heavy cardboard boxes from the Student Council storage room (the room next to the Student Council's room) to the shed.

"Hafuuu~"

Yusa plunked the box she'd been carrying down onto the floor of the shed, and then sat down on top of it.

She was breathing heavily, and her forehead was covered in sweat.

I was in much the same shape, and was currently resting against a shelf regaining my breath.

"Haa..... This is pretty hard work..."

"Sh-shure ish... Hau..."

Yusa gave a tired nod in response to my wry smile.

"How much is left?"

"There's still all the boxes on the floor in our storage room, so at least 10..."

"Seriously...? All of those...?"

"B-but don't worry! We're almost done with all the paper, all that should be left after that is cloth and wood stuff!"

"C-cloth aside, isn't wood kinda heavy...!?"

I said as a cold sweat ran down my cheek.

"...I know it's too late now anyway, but couldn't you have burned all the paper and cloth at the campfire?"

I thought it was a pretty good idea myself, but Yusa simply made a wry smile.

"Ahaha... Maybe some of it, but definitely not all of it."

"Eh, how come?"

"It's dangerous if the fire gets too big, and some stuff might be toxic if we burned it. There's also the fact that the people in the neighborhood would complain if we kept the campfire going too late into the night. ...Actually, it's so much work to do the campfire that every year people say we should stop doing it."

"Really?"

"Yes. We only still do it because it's been a tradition since the school was founded. ...Although some people say it's also because the chairman won't cancel it."

Guess there's a lot of annoying behind-the-scenes stuff even for something as beautiful as the campfire.

"...Alright, ready to get back to work?"

"Ah, yes. ...Um... I think I'll do the rest by myself after all, Hasegawa you can..."

I cut off Yusa mid-sentence, and told her,

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm helping you to the very end and that's that. .....But, well, wanna call it a day after two or three more boxes? It's starting to get dark and all."

"Eh!? Are you going to help me tomorrow too?"

"Of course."

Yusa looked incredibly grateful and made a bashful smile upon hearing my answer.

"Hasegawa... Thank you very much...!"

"Don't sweat it."

...Having someone direct such honest appreciation towards me was honestly really painful. I don't deserve to be thanked by anyone.

"C-come on, let's go."

"OK!"

Yusa nodded with a smile after I'd stuttered my words out, after which we turned towards the entrance to the shed.

However as we did, someone appeared at the entrance.

"...!?"

The light behind them was so bright I couldn't see their face very well.

I could tell the person had long hair and was wearing a skirt though, so it had to be a girl.

"Kuhaha! Excellent work you two!"

...I know I've heard that clear voice that makes you want to just keep on listening to it before.

The girl who'd just appeared with a blinding light behind her greeted us in a hearty voice along with a boisterous laugh, and then entered the shed.

Her good-looks gave her an aura of refinement and intelligence, and her long black hair, tied into braids which made her look like the daughter of a well-off family, only served to strengthen that impression.

Slender legs, a supple waist, and a plump yet modest chest.

Her name is Hinata Hidaka.

She's the student council president here at St. Chronica Academy, beloved by just about everybody (or so I've heard), as well as the girl Yozora secretly loathes and calls "King Lear".

"Hinata!? Why are you here!?"

Yusa said in a shocked tone of voice.

President Hinata responded by going "Heh," before making a both majestic and charming smile, and then saying,

"I heard there was a regular student helping you out with your work, you see. I figured I should say my thanks as Student Council President."

"Eh..."

She came all the way out here just to thank me?

I was pretty shocked myself, but Yusa simply gave the president a cold stare.

"...You just used that as an excuse to skip out on your work again, didn't you?"

"Kuhaha! Interacting with my fellow students *is* my job!"

From the looks of it Yusa was spot on with her guess, but the president didn't seem to care at all and instead made a cheerful laugh.

"My goodness..."

Yusa said with a sigh, after which the president shifted her gaze away from Yusa and over to me.

Her eyes resembling a pair of giant black pearls met with mine.

Her gaze had a certain force to it, but it wasn't an overwhelming one. Rather, it was a tender, comfortable one.

It almost felt like I was going to be sucked into those eyes of hers.

"Hinata, this is Kodaka Hasegawa of class 2-5."

Yusa said, introducing me to the president, which elicited from her the following response:

"Ohh, so this is him, huh!?"

"Eh, you know him?"

"Nope."

The president said with a serious look on her face in reply to Yusa's surprise.

"Then why'd you act all surprised!?"

"I was just going with the flow!"

.....What the heck is going on here...

For a second there I thought that even the Student Council President had heard all those bad rumors about me... I almost had a heart attack for cryin' out loud...

"Sheesh..."

Yusa's expression now appeared a bit annoyed as she introduced the president to me.

"Ah, Hasegawa, this is the Student Council President, Hinata Hidaka."

"Ah, yeah... I know."

I said before making a little bow in the president's direction.

"Umm... Hi, I'm Hasegawa."

"I'm Hinata Hidaka. Nice to meet you, Hasegawa."

"Ah, y-yeah, same here."

I couldn't help but feel nervous after having that smile as bright as the sun itself cast at me all of a sudden.

"By the way, why are you helping Aoi, Hasegawa? ...Ah, I know , you must be Aoi's boyfriend, right!? I'm so jealous of you, Aoi!"

""T-that's not it!!""

Yusa and I both denied the president's question in harmony with one another.

Yusa then went red in the face and started fidgeting as she went on to say,

"T-there's no way that... Hasegawa would ever g-go out with someone like me! Besides, Hasegawa already has a fine girlfri-... Oh, wait. You said you *aren't* going out with Sena Kashiwazaki, didn't you?"

"Y-yeah, that's right..."

Hearing Sena's name got me flustered again.

"Then are you going out with anyone else in the Neighbors Club?"

"I-I'm not! I'm not going out with anyone. ...It's not like that with them."

"Hmm, I see. That makes sense though."

"? What do you mean by that?"

I asked, thinking it was weird how convinced Yusa looked, to which she replied,

"Eh? Because, you're the only guy in the Neighbors Club, right? Things would get really awkward if the only super cool guy in the club started going out with one of the girls!"

.....

.....

...Whether I'm cool or not is up for debate, but...

I placed my hand on Yusa's head—— and started patting her.

"H-Hasegawa!? W-why are you patting me on the head with an expression that looks like the face an old man not long for this world would make while looking at his newborn granddaughter!? "

"Ah, well~... It's just... I'm happy that someone out there gets it... ..."

Crap, I might actually cry.

"I-I don't really get it, but... f-feel free to pat me as much as you like! ...Fuah... It feels so good..."

"Hey~ Earth to Hasegawa~"

The president said with a dumbfounded look on her face, after which I let out a gasp and stopped patting Yusa's head.

Yusa, who'd been entranced until just a second ago, also came back to her senses and started blushing before quickly moving away from me.

"So, if you're not her boyfriend then why?"

"Ah, well, it seemed like a lot of work for just one person, so, you know..."

"Hasegawa is a wonderful person who can't overlook those in need!"

"Eh!? No, I wouldn't go that far..."

Yusa's overwhelming praise left me feeling bewildered.

"I see, that's quite admirable of you! Not many young men like you these days. Keep up the good work!"

"...Eh? Oh, yeah..."

"Alright then, let's get this cleaned up!"

However Yusa squinted at the president's easygoing comment and said,

"...Hinata, please go do your own work."

"Kuhaha, no need to be so cold with me. Come on, it'll go faster with three people, won't it?"

"...Well, yes, that's true, but..."

Yusa then let out a sigh of resignation.

"...Fine. I don't want to bother Hasegawa any more than I already have, so let's all do it together. We might be able to finish today if you help us."

The boxes we'd been carrying were plenty heavy to begin with, but the president was able to carry two of them easily.

Thanks to that we were able to carry twice as many boxes per trip as before, and just like Yusa said, we ended up finishing moving all the boxes just as the sun had begun to set.

...This girl is really something...

I let out a sigh of admiration as I followed President Hidaka back to the main school building.

I'd heard that clubs always fight over getting her to help them out with stuff, but she really is an incredibly powerful person, despite her girlish looks.

"Hnn, haven't had a good workout like that in a while!"

The president was busy stretching her arms out full of satisfaction as we walked.

"...Come to think of it, what events were you in for the athletics festival, President?" I asked on a whim.

Given her strength and stamina I'd imagine her doing really well at the athletics festival, but oddly enough I can't remember ever seeing her.

"...The ball-toss."

The president said, almost as if pouting about it.

"Huh? The ball-toss?"

"My team would've won for sure if I'd actually participated, so the festival committee told me not to do any events other than the ones everyone does. Hahhh, I wanted to play at the festival too you know."

She then pursed her lips a bit, and made a bitter look at Yusa.

"T-there was nothing we could do about it... It wouldn't be any fun if everyone knew who'd win right from the start. It would've been a different story if you weren't in class 3 though."

"Class 3...? Ohhh..."

I realized what Yusa meant by that.

The teams for the festival were broken up by class number, which made it so the president in class 3-3 and Sena in class 2-3 were on the same team.

If there were two people who win every event they're in on the same team, then no other team would've even had a chance of winning, and the entire festival would've been ruined.

The president made another cheerful laugh after seeing Yusa's uncomfortable expression.

"Kuhaha, I know. You guys made the right choice. I'm the Student Council President after all, it was my duty to put up with it so everyone could have fun. What do you think Hasegawa? Pretty admirable of me, right?"

"Haha, you'd be more admirable if you didn't brag about it."

I couldn't help but let out a laugh.

...She's a really interesting person.

Not only does she put others above herself, but she does so gracefully without a hint of bitterness about it. I can see why so many people would like her.

"By the way, Hasegawa."

The president stopped walking all of a sudden, and turned around towards me.

"Yes?"

"I like you, would you be interested in joining the Student Council?"

"Huh?"

I stood there, stunned.

"W-wh-where did that come from!?" Yusa yelped, seeming as flustered as me.

"It's nothing much. We lost our general affairs manager recently , so since the position's open I figured I'd ask."

"Figured you'd ask? Isn't that a bit too casual...?"

I was astonished by how carefree she was being about it.

"Hrmm... That's not a bad idea... There's also the rule that says: ' In the event there is a vacancy in the executive roles, the president is allowed to appoint a regular member to the position so long as the other executive members agree,' so it wouldn't be breaking the rules either."

"Now you too, Yusa!?"

Yusa continued to stare at me with a serious look on her face, despite my yelling, and said,

"The executive roles in the Student Council are currently fulfilled by President Hinata, Vice-President Akane Ohtomo, our treasurer, me, and our clerk, Karin Jinguuji, but we always run into trouble because we're so short on hands."

"Carrying all these boxes was supposed to be the general affairs manager's work, too," the president added.

"We have to hurry and finish the preparations for the Christmas party and ski training in January too, so right now we can use all the help we can get. The four of us are all girls too, which presents problems for us sometimes... Having a guy around would be a huge help! I'm sure you'd be perfect for the job, Hasegawa!"

Yusa seemed strangely enthusiastic as she tried to convince me to join, but all I did was sigh.

"I'd be perfect for the job...? Do you honestly think that?"

"? What do you mean?"

Yusa tilted her head in confusion, so I asked her,

"...Do you honestly not know what everyone else at school thinks of me?"

Yusa paused briefly to think before cutely tilting her head again , and replying,

"Umm, do they all think..... that you're **a super cool bad boy**?"

"You're the only one who thinks that! Thank you!"

Her answer was so off the mark that I ended up thanking her before regaining my composure and letting out another sigh.

"Hahh... You're completely wrong. ...I'm not a bad boy, just plain 'bad'... Basically, like a yankee or a delinquent. My hair, my face, and a bunch of other little stuff I do makes everyone think that."

"What!?"

"Hrm... Now that you mention it your hair does stand out a bit at this school, and you look menacing. I can see why people would think you're a delinquent."

I ended up making a wry smile after hearing the president's blunt evaluation, and said,

"Do you get it now? If you let someone like me into the Student Council it'll just make you guys look b——"

"Only a fool would judge someone based on their appearance alone. I couldn't care less what people like that think."

The president declared without a hint of hesitation, as if it were only natural.

I opened my eyes wide in surprise, and simply stood there staring at the president's face.

Come to think of it, she hasn't made a single comment about my appearance all day today, let alone acted scared of me because of it .

Up until now, I've had people act afraid of me like most students do, think I'm a yankee like Sena and Kate did when we first met, tease me for looking like a Yankee like Yozora and Rika do, or in rare cases have some weird yet positive impression of me like Yusa and Yukimura, all because of how I look.

This girl before me might be the first person I've ever met who's the same age as me but doesn't care about how I look at all.

Don't judge someone based on how they look—— It's easy enough to say, but doing it is hard.

Even I sometimes think "She's got a cute face" or "He looks scary " despite having met my fair share of trouble because of people doing that to me. In fact, I even imagined 'how much easier my life would be if I had that kind of friendly appearance' when I saw the president give her speech at the athletics festival, too. I don't think anyone can really help themselves from thinking like that.

And that's to say nothing about the near-impossible act of completely ignoring the appearance of someone you've just met.

Hinata Hidaka, huh...

I can't believe someone like her exists... and in the same school as me, too.

"What's the matter, Hasegawa? Why are you spacing out?"

"Ah, i-it's nothing!"

I hurriedly tried to act normal after the president gave me a dubious look.

"I see. So, how about it?"

I was honestly at a loss.

I thought to myself that working for this person wouldn't be half bad—— in fact, it'd probably be amazing.

However I shook that thought off, and told her,

"...S-sorry, but I think the Student Council is too much for me..."

"I see..."

Upon seeing the dejected look on the president's face, I quickly added,

"B-but, if you ever need help with manual labor stuff like this again, then just say the word! I've usually got plenty of free time!"

I blurted it out so fast it was as if I'd done it by reflex.

"By reflex"—— In other words, it wasn't an excuse to avoid the Neighbors Club, it was how I truly felt.

After hearing that, both the president's and Yusa's faces broke out into huge smiles.

"I see! So then, can you come again tomorrow? The library staff asked us to help sort some books."

"O-of course, no problem at all!"

"A fine answer. Today must be my lucky day, meeting such a hard worker as yourself! It was worth sneaking away from Akane to come out here, kuhahaha!"

The president said full of cheer, along with a loud, hearty laugh.

Oh Flower, Bloom in her Resilient Heart

Just as I'd agreed, I spent the next day helping Yusa, the president, and the students working in the library sort the library's books.

Apparently some alumni from our school recently closed down a book shop they'd been running and donated a large chunk of what they had left to the school.

We still weren't done even when it was time to go home, so I spent the day after that sorting books as well.

As for why the Student Council executives were helping sort the library's books, that would be because according to the president it's the executive members' job to help any clubs or committees that ask for help.

According to what I was told, at first people only asked for help when they really needed it, but the Student Council's amazing work made them so popular that tons of students call on them fairly frequently.

The president doesn't seem to mind being used to handle a bunch of odd jobs though, waving it off by saying "Having the students rely on us is a good thing."

In addition to helping the clubs and committees, the Student Council has plenty of other duties as well, such as the normal stuff like holding meetings for events, holding meetings with other committees, and writing up various documents, but they also

handle tons of other little jobs like making copies of printouts for classes, helping clean clubrooms, and helping carrying equipment around the school.

Of course, I can't make their documents or attend meetings for them, so all the work left to me was either manual labor or random odd jobs.

That said, apparently having even one extra person to handle those jobs makes a big difference, because both the president and Yusa would thank me several times a day. In fact, even the other members of the Student Council—— the vice-president, Akane Ohmoto-senpai (a beautiful girl with a boyish feel to her. Apparently she's known the president since grade school), and the Student Council secretary, Karin Jinguuji (A quiet and pretty pure Japanese junior. One of the few actual Christians at our school.)—— who didn't have a very good impression of me at first, opened up to me quite a bit after we did some work together, and I've currently exchanged e-mail addresses with everyone on the Student Council.

However, as for my reputation with the rest of the student body , apparently they think I'm helping the Student Council because I got in trouble, and that the president is amazing for getting a delinquent like me to obey her, thus improving the president's reputation even further while leaving mine the same as ever.

...Although, it's not like people making up random rumors about me is anything new, and at least the rumors about me aren't getting any worse. It's true that the president's charisma made me want to work with her too and all.

In any case, before I knew it an entire week had passed.

It was now already December.

I haven't been to the Neighbors Club a single time since Sena's explosive confession.

I haven't even seen any of the club members besides Yozora, who's in my class, Yukimura, who brings me lunch and yankee manga every day, and Kobato.

Yozora hardly ever talks to me in class though, and it looks like Kobato's been following me and not going to club either, so I haven't talked about the Neighbors Club at all the past week.

Yukimura's been the same as ever too. Even when she would come to see me at lunch, she wouldn't bring up the fact that I haven't been going to club, and would simply leave the classroom after finishing what she came to do.

I never bothered to ask her what's been going on at the Neighbors Club either.

Just so we're clear though, it's not that I don't care about the Neighbors Club anymore.

I still care about it deeply, and want to protect that comfortable world of ours.

But, even if I tell myself "Today's the day I go back to the Neighbors Club," my legs end up carrying me not to the chapel, but to the Student Council's room.

Basically, going back to the place I once ran away from is scary.

Our situations might be different, but I still think it's seriously amazing how tough Sena is that she can always come back like nothing had ever happened each time she goes running out of the clubroom.

"Haa..."

"What's the matter Kodaka?"

Yusa looked confused at my sudden melancholic sigh as she walked beside me.

"Ah, it's nothing."

I was helping the Student Council again today.

Aoi's question came while we were busy carrying a big stack of printouts we just copied in the copier room back to the Student Council room.

But then, just as we made it to the hall connecting the normal classrooms to the special-use ones, someone called out to me all of a sudden.

"——So this is where you were, Aniki."

The owner of the voice who then began walking towards me was none other than Yukimura Kusunoki.

She was wearing a boy's uniform, just like my own.

I was used to seeing her dressed like that though, given that she only wears the butler uniform for club activities. Every day when she brings me bread and yankee manga at lunch she comes in her usual regular uniform.

...However it was now after school—— In other words, it was the usual time for **club activities**.

Seeing her in the school uniform at this time of day was incredibly rare.

"H-hey Yukimura."

For some reason I felt incredibly nervous.

"W-what's up?"

Yukimura walked all the way up right next to me, and looked at me with her usual expressionless face and said,

"I heard that the Student Council caught you in their foul clutches and were forcing you to be their slave, so I came to save you."

"T-their slave?"

She's off in her own little dream world again!

"...I will not stand by and let you claim the Student Council is foul, or that we make people be our slaves!"

Aoi puffed out her cheeks and stepped out in front of me.

"Kodaka was simply kind enough to help me out! I won't let you badmouth us for that!"

"....."

Yukimura made a faint frown, and then looked not at Aoi, but at me, and asked,

"...Is what she says true, Aniki?"

"Y-yeah... I'm helping them out of my own free will..."

I averted my eyes from Yukimura, feeling a bit guilty as I answered her.

After hearing my answer, Yukimura replied,

"I see. I shall offer my assistance as well then."

She didn't try to blame me, and she didn't hesitate either. It was as if her reply was the most natural thing in the world to her.

"No thank you! We don't need anyone else!"

Aoi was rather forceful in her rejection, and in response Yukimura's lips bent into a frown yet again.

"...I am here to help Aniki, please do not misunderstand me."

"It's the same thing! .....Ahh!"

Aoi pointed at Yukimura all of a sudden in shock.

"I just realized, you're that person from the Neighbors Club who tried to poison me!"

"Indeed."

Yukimura nodded her head as if to ask, "So what?"

"W-why are you wearing a boy's uniform!?"

Having someone point that out after all this time was actually quite refreshing, however Yukimura simply gave Aoi a confident look, and said,

"That would be because I am aiming to become a true man."

As for Aoi's reaction to Yukimura's declaration,

"...? What?"

She tilted her head to the side as if she truly had no idea what was just said.

"...I am aiming to become a true man."

Yukimura repeated herself, but Aoi still looked as confused as ever.

"What do you mean by... a true man?"

Yukimura seemed to be at a loss for words, but managed to reply,

"......A very amazing man."

Well, that was a pretty vague explanation. Although, in a way it was kind of manly.

"Uh-huh. But you're a girl, right?"

"Correct. However, a true man is a being that transcends gender."

"Huh? What on Earth are you talking about? You're pretty weird~"

Yukimura had a fairly self-satisfied look on her face as she explained, but all Aoi did was tilt her head at her.

"....."

Yukimura went silent after being called weird on top of not being able to get her point across.

Upon taking a good look at her, I noticed that her hands were balled up into fists and that her lips were trembling.

She then asked me, as faint tears began to form in the corners of her eyes,

"A... A-Aniki! May I slay this woman?"

"Woah woah, calm down!"

I've never seen her like this.

"Slay me? You're as violent as ever I see! There is no way I can let a weirdo like you do any Student Council work!"

Aoi's hands were full so she tried to get rid of Yukimura by going "Shoo, shoo!" at her.

"Fghh...!"

Yukimura pursed her lips together and glared at Aoi, and of course Aoi glared back.

However, for Yukimura glaring consists of a slight change in the angle of her eyebrows and lips at best, and Aoi looked like a puppy doing its best to look intimidating. Honestly, neither of them looked threatening in the least, and in fact they almost looked a bit cute, but I can't sit here and let them glare at each other all day either.

"...Aoi, sorry, but go on ahead. I need to talk to her a bit."

"Uh-huh... Okay then, if you say so."

Aoi said, nodding with a somewhat displeased look on her face before walking off towards the main school building.

"...I apologize for my outburst just now, Aniki."

Yukimura said in a shy voice after Aoi had left.

"Guess even you have a hard time with some people, huh."

I said, teasing her a little bit, causing her to reply in a displeased manner,

"...I do not like that individual."

"No pulled punches with you, huh... You'd probably like her if you just talked to her a bit."

Come to think of it, I get the feeling Aoi and Yukimura resemble each other in a weird way.

".....Her name." Yukimura quietly added.

"Her name?"

"...'Aoi' is the Tokugawa household's family crest. Yukimura Sanada was one step away from claiming Ieyasu Tokugawa's head at the siege of Okinawa, but was ultimately repelled and met a regretful end."

"...Yeah, I know about the battle between Ieyasu Tokugawa and Yukimura Sanada too, but what does that..... Wait, you hate her just because of the history of your names!?"

"Correct."

"Are you for real...?"

"No, I was just joking."

"I really don't think you should hate someone over something like——

What the heck, it was a joke?"

I said in retort to Yukimura's joke.

...I can't tell if you're joking or not when you say it with such a straight face...

Yukimura looked a little embarrassed as she then told me,

"That was a wonderful retort, Aniki. ...The truth is, I just can't seem to like her for some reason."

"I see..."

It's completely normal to have a couple people that you just don't get along with, but seeing that even Yukimura has people she likes and doesn't like was a bit of a shock.

"W-well, anyway, Aoi aside..."

I timidly said, and then finally asked what'd been bugging me the whole past week.

"...How've things been at the Neighbors Club?"

"Sena-anego is absorbed in her galge as always."

"...Nothing fazes her, does it..." I said with a wry smile.

Naturally, I'd been curious about Sena the most because I figured that even someone as tough as her might be having a hard time after what happened, but it looks like I was worried for nothing.

She really is amazing.

Too amazing, too strong, too brilliant——... She just feels so far away.

"What's everyone else been up to?"

"Who knows."

Yukimura said while lightly tilting her head to the side.

"...? What do you mean...?"

"Yozora-anego and Ms. Rika have not come to the clubroom in the past few days. Ms. Maria comes by sometimes for some snacks before going home."

————!!

I felt light headed all of a sudden.

"...So basically, only you and Sena have been showing up to club?"

"Correct."

Yukimura replied to my question with a gentle nod, her expression unchanging.

Things are even worse than I'd imagined.

Previously, there was one time Yozora stopped coming to club after she burned her hair at the end of summer break.

It was pretty awkward and gloomy back then, but even so everyone else still showed up.

And that is exactly why I was hoping it would be the same this time, too. I'd hoped that as time passed—— as the situation cooled off, that before I knew it everyone would have returned like nothing had ever happened.

However it would appear I was far too optimistic.

Crunch... I ground my teeth hard enough it was nearly audible.

Time passing wasn't solving the problem, it was actually making it worse... I need to do something, I need to do something fast—— but I have no idea what to do.

Our peaceful group was now all of a sudden on the brink of collapsing—— What do you usually do at a time like this? How do the normals of the world solve problems like this? The more people you're involved with, in other words, the more of a normal you are, the more you should have experience with this kind of situation. If that's true, then tell me what to do. This might be something typical for a normal person, but it's a huge crisis for a friend-less guy like me, and one I've never had to face before at that.

Then, as if to interrupt my thoughts,

"——Aniki, allow me to carry half."

Yukimura said, offering her help.

"Half...? O-oh, you mean the printouts?"

Yukimura gave a silent nod.

"...It's okay, I can carry it by myself."

"I see..." Yukimura said in a disappointed tone of voice.

"In that case, perhaps there is something else I could assist you with?"

"No... I don't think I'll really need any extra help today."

"Understood. I shall see you tomorrow then." Yukimura gently replied.

However before she could leave, I asked her, unable to hide my nervousness,

"Hey, Yukimura... Why do you try to do so much for me?"

"That would be because I am your underling, Aniki."

She gave the same answer as always, without a moment of hesitation.

She didn't seem particularly concerned about the danger the Neighbor's Club was in either. She was just her usual self, exactly the same as when we talk in the clubroom.

I felt a slight anger at Yukimura for that as I asked her,

"...Alright, then I'll change the question."

"OK."

"...Why do you always act like you're my underling? You must have realized by now... that I'm not 'a fine Japanese man' or 'a true man' or anything like that, right? I'm just a sort of scary-looking loser."

"Yes, I know."

Yukimura said, giving her clear affirmation.

.....I know I'm the one who asked, but having her admit it so easily like that left me a bit shocked.

"Eh... You actually did notice?"

"Yes, because I am your underling."

Yukimura said, giving the same answer as before.

It's only natural for an underling to know about one's aniki.

I'm sure that's what she's trying to say, but...

"T... then why!? Why would you want to be the underling of a guy like me!? It doesn't even make any sense!!"

I said, practically yelling at Yukimura.

Yukimura seemed confused at my pathetic reaction though, and asked me,

"Does it have to make sense?"

She easily put that mysterious thought—— at least, a thought I never would've come up with, into words as if it were the most natural thing in the world to her, as if she were stating some obvious fact.

All it did was make me more confused though.

"Does it have to... You... If it doesn't make sense, then, I mean, eh...? I mean, it has to, otherwise I, you... If it doesn't make sense, if you don't need it, then..."

"Does it have to be necessary?"

Yukimura tenderly smiled at me as I went on mumbling a bunch of nonsense to myself.

"I stay by your side because I want to."

——Because I want to——

I don't do it because it makes sense, or because it's necessary.

I do it simply because that is what I wish to do.

Yukimura was able to declare that without faltering in the slightest.

...A week ago when I was talking to Aoi, I realized something.

——Yozora Mikadzuki, Sena Kashiwazaki, Yukimura Kusunoki , Rika Shiguma, Kobato Hasegawa, and Maria Takayama can all live just fine without the Neighbor's Club.

And the same is true for me. It might not be fun, but I could survive without it.

The only difference would be going back to being alone, like I was before the Neighbor's Club.

The Neighbor's Club's existence has no meaning, nor is it necessary.

In fact, it's actually holding back a bunch of amazing girls from going out into a bright and lively world. One could even say it's like a shackle.

That fact is one reason why I've been unable to do anything this past week. And yet this girl in front of me...

"...You know... you're pretty cool..."

Words of admiration quietly tumbled out of my mouth.

She lives guided not by what's right, but by her own feelings.

Back when Yukimura first joined the Neighbor's Club, she described the ideal man she wished to become——

A strong yet open-minded individual who lives life the way they desire, not bound by the trifling rules of others.

One who is above the human concepts of good and evil, who does not fear even the gods themselves, simply living for their own sake and their own happiness.

...Yukimura... Isn't that what you already are?

"...What would you do if the Neighbor's Club went away?"

"Nothing much. I would simply continue to serve you as I have been, Aniki."

She is the only one in the Neighbor's Club who said "I do not want friends."

She's also been told by the other members that they don't want to be with her, that it was a mistake to let her in the club, and has received various other insults, yet she stayed, unaffected by their words.

That strong girl quickly and clearly gave me her answer.

"...You know, you're way more of a man than I am."

She's much more manly, much more cool than a guy like me who's been running away like a girl this whole week.

She's a strong person, able to clearly state what she likes and doesn't like, living her life without hesitation guided by her own set of values.

She's just like Sena... Like a 'fixed star'—— Someone who can shine with their own strength.

She can shine incredibly brightly... so much so you can't look at it directly.

Compared to this ridiculously cool underling of mine, all you can do is call me lame.

"...I'm, well... sorry, Yukimura. You aren't... No... *I'm* not fit to be *your Aniki*. Not in the least..."

Yukimura blushed a bit, seeing my weak, pathetic, shameless, tiny wry smile, and then stared straight at me with the blank look of hers.

"...? W-what is it?"

I asked, confused, to which Yukimura replied, her whole body trembling,

"Aniki... I have never regretted the fact that I am not a man more than I do right now...!"

She looked incredibly serious and opened her eyes wide at me, but I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Seeing you right now is making my heart pound incredibly hard. Were I a muscular man, I would pin you to the ground right this instant and shove my roaring self deep into your yaoi hole."

"Bfoh!? What the hell!?

I did a double-take and choked on my own spit spectacularly. That was how insane what she just said was.

"Honestly, it's such a horrible state of affairs..."

"The crap you're saying is what's horrible here!"

Honestly, what she just said was so ridiculous it nearly blew away all the respect I have for her.

"Ms. Rika taught me that true men take the men they love by force without any hesitation. I want to rape you, Aniki. I want to pump your yaoi hole full of my burning desire for you."

"On what planet is it okay to tell someone you want to rape them!? Are you retarded!? Also, there's no such thing as a yaoi hole!"

Yukimura appeared startled for an instant at my near-screaming, but then smiled gently at me and said,

"Oh Aniki, you and your jokes."

"IT'S NOT A JOOOOOOKE!!"

I let out a huge roar, completely ignoring all the students walking through the hall giving me weird looks.

...O-oh, right...

Things got so hectic I'd forgotten about it, but Yukimura still believes everything Ms. Rika said in her lecture on the birds and the bees.

...Do I really have to show her the real thing to prove it to her?

Is there no other way to show her there's no such thing as a yaoi hole?

This might be the one thing I can do for my underling, Yukimura..... Wait, what am I thinking!? I'm not gonna sacrifice myself to give some stupid sex ed. class!

"You know, you... really are amazing..."

From the moment we first met... Specifically, from the day she started stalking me, she's done nothing but surprise me time and time again...

I let out a deep sigh after having my mental fortitude completely chiseled away.

And, as I did, my phone started ringing in my pocket all of a sudden.

"Hm? A text?"

Up until recently I'd almost always kept in my bag at school, but I now I carry it around with me so I can stay in touch with the rest of the Student Council.

Did Aoi send me a text because I'm still not back yet?

"...Sorry, can you hold these for a sec?"

"OK."

Yukimura responded to my request and happily took the handouts I'd been carrying, freeing up both my hands and allowing me to check my phone.

"......!"

The person who sent me the text was neither Aoi nor any of the other Student Council members—— It was Rika Shiguma.

My hands were tense with nervousness, but somehow I managed to open up the text.

Dear Kodaka-senpai,

Please come to the roof immediately p. If you aren't here in the next 3 minutes, I'll play the recording I took of you reading that BL novel out loud over the whole school's PA system♥

"Eek...!!"

My voice cracked as I let out a girly yelp.

W-when did she record that!? And why!? What does she want to do!?

That "p" she put after immediately is making me nervous too. If "b" is a thumbs up, then is "p" the opposite of that?

...Argh, I don't have time to think about this right now!

My high school life is over if she plays that recording...!

Three minutes... I need to hurry...

"Aniki?"

Yukimura tilted her head at me in confusion.

"...Sorry, something just came up. Can you take those handouts to the Student Council room for me?"

"Consider it done."

"Awesome, thanks!"

I gave my thanks, and then sprinted off towards the general classrooms building.

There was no need to worry about which building's roof she was talking about.

I knew that if Rika was calling me out to the roof, it'd be the same place we met during the athletics festival——, the roof of the general classrooms building where "those words" were lost in the wind.

"Aniki."

Yukimura called out to me from behind.

"Hm?"

I stopped and looked back over my shoulder at her, despite being in a hurry.

And what I saw, was Yukimura **tenderly smiling** at me, like a freshly bloomed flower.

"————Best of luck in your battle."

That lovely smile of hers, a kind which I'd never seen her make before, was more than enough to permanently engrave **the girl** named Yukimura Kusunoki into my heart.

The End of the Prologue/The Day Kodaka Hasegawa Became a Protagonist

I ran through the halls as fast as I could, flew up the stairs two at a time, and then swung the door to the roof wide open.

The cold breeze that awaited me blew across my entire body.

It wasn't as strong as the wind on that day, but it was certainly colder, it being December now and all.

Rika Shiguma was standing there, waiting for me on that cold rooftop.

"......Haa... Haa... R-Rika..."

I glared at Rika while breathing heavily.

"...3 minutes and 26 seconds since I sent you the text, huh. You're late, but if I count the time it took for the mail to get to you and for you to read it, I suppose I can let you off the hook."

Rika said with an amused giggle.

"...I bet you don't even have a recording of me reading that stuff , do you? And how would you even play it over the PA system anyway?"

I didn't have any time to think about it before so I panicked, but thinking about it rationally as I catch my breath, there's no way she -

"Hehe."

Rika laughed gently, and then hit a button on the handheld terminal she had in the right hand.

The sound of the speakers turning on rang through the air, and then,

"Heh heh"

Click.

It was only for an instant, but that was definitely me playing the role of the sadistic biology teacher just now.

"You were serious!?"

Rika simply went "Hmph." and exhaled through her nose after hearing my scream.

"Rika is quite skilled, Senpai. Setting up something like this is a piece of cake. Not that I eat much cake, but you get the idea."

"A-alright, I'm sorry... Just please don't play that over the PA system..."

I begged Rika to stop with my head hung down in defeat.

"Well, I did say I'd let you off the hook. I'll keep my word."

She said before sticking the terminal back into her lab coat's pocket.

Rika was wearing her usual school uniform and lab coat. No glasses.

Her hair was its usual black, hanging straight down... and while her hair was normal, she was wearing a headband with cat ears on it for some reason.

She's dyed her hair blond and even silver before, so honestly the cat ears weren't much of a surprise to me, but she's already plenty cute without that kinda cheap gimmick if you ask me. Note that I thought that, and did not say it out loud.

"...So, what do you want?" I asked.

"It's nothing much really——"

She said with both hands stuck in her pockets, and then glared at me with a lazy smile.

"I just thought I'd beat some sense into the pathetic delinquent who ran away like a little girl while trying to act cool by spewing some bullshit about wanting to 'protect the Neighbors Club (`・´)'"

I went "Uu..." and let out a faint moan, after hearing her say that .

".....I'm sorry."

I gave her an honest, heartfelt apology.

"...Pretty obedient of you. Not gonna try to make up some excuses?"

Rika said, clearly unamused.

The cat ears on her head twitched as she spoke.

"...No, because you of all people deserve to be mad at me."

I was the one who ran away from Rika on the roof that day, after she criticized me for playing dumb and tried to force us to move onward.

The very next day though, she was back to her usual pervert fujoshi self.

She bent her own will to go along with my desire to maintain the status quo in the Neighbor's Club.

She did so much for me, and yet I betrayed her.

"...You can kick me, punch me, or do whatever you want."

If doing that will help her feel better, it's a small price to pay.

It's the least I can do to atone for what I've done to her.

The cat ears on Rika's head started to move back and forth.

They weren't blowing in the wind though, it was more like they were moving according to Rika's own will, like a real pair of cat ears.

"Hmph... how admirable of you. I suppose I'll take you up on your offer then."

Rika said as she took her right hand out of her lab coat's outer pocket, and started fishing around in one of the inner pockets. She then took out three dully shining balls that were each a bit bigger than a ping pong ball.

"......?"

...What the heck are those?

"Wup."

Rika tossed the balls in front of her as I stood there confused.

However, instead of hitting the ground, each of them stayed floating in the air.

...What the heck...? They look like regular (metal?) balls, but somehow I've got a bad feeling about them.

"...What are those?"

"They're part of the **Nine Lives Breaker**."

Rika coolly replied.

".....And what is that?"

I asked again in a stilted tone of voice.

"They're balls remotely controlled by my brain waves."

And that was the answer I got.

"...I took the name from season 3 of that anime Kobato likes, *Kurogane no Necromancer*. It's the name of the special attack the main character learns at the end of season three. It's a fearsome attack spell that severs the cycle of death and rebirth, obliterating the enemy's soul in the process. Not only can someone hit by this attack not be brought back to life, they can never be reborn ever again."

"Yeah, I didn't need an explanation of the anime. ...So, honestly, what are those things?"

I asked while feeling a boundless sense of danger.

"It'll probably be faster if I just show you."

Rika responded with a sadistic grin, and then yelled,

"Crush my enemy's soul! **Nine Lives Breaker**!!"

Her yell sounded incredibly similar to the one I sometimes catch glimpses of Guernica-chan letting out for her **Hell Blaze Buster** when Kobato's watching the anime at home, and, as her yell echoed across the rooftop, the cat ears on her head stood straight up, and the three balls came flying towards me.

So fast!!

I was so surprised I didn't have time to dodge.

Smack! Thunk! Crash!

"Aguah!?"

Each of the three balls hit my gut at almost exactly the same time.

I let out a scream in agony due to the sudden intense pain.

The balls quickly left me after that, and went back to Rika.

"...Ow ow ow..."

I glared at Rika while holding my stomach in pain.

"...Y-you little... What the hell..."

"You're the one who said I could do whatever I want, Senpai."

Rika said without so much as budging an eyebrow at my groaning.

Those cat ears flicking around on her head were starting to piss me off now.

"...Yeah, but... this is... ridiculous... If you're gonna hit me do it with your hands...!"

"Rika's weak little punches wouldn't even faze you. Don't go thinking you can run away from your guilt with something as light as that."

"Uu..."

"Hence, I decided to beat you up with a weapon I made myself, since I am an inventor and all."

"...You wanna beat me up that badly?"

I asked, prompting Rika to stare at me with steady eyes.

"...Rika is mad, Senpai. ...I can't obliterate your soul like in an anime—— but I can beat that pathetic escapist attitude out of you!!"

The **Nine Lives Breaker** came at me again right as Rika finished her declaration.

"Uoh!"

I made a wide dodge by reflex and managed to dodge two of them but the third hit me right in my side.

"Aguh!"

I groaned at the sharp pain that ran through me.

The two balls that missed me hit the concrete floor and made a light "clink" sound along with a loud "crunch" as if they'd dug into the pavement before floating back towards Rika.

"E-escapist? But I——"

I tried to argue back, but was soon interrupted.

"——You ended up running away because you were confused and didn't know what to do. Emotionally speaking, I can see where you're coming from. Even Rika panicked a little bit. I never would've imagined Sena would ask you to marry her all of sudden right in front of everyone else like that."

Rika said with a frown on her face.

"S-see? There was no way I could——"

However, she quickly changed to a glare, and fired the three balls at me again.

"Wha—— Uoh!!"

I managed to dodge all three this time on account of her poor aiming.

Rika went "Tch." and clicked her tongue at me before yelling,

"That's not the problem! Rika is mad about what you did *after* that!!"

She then took out three more **Nine Lives Breaker** balls from her lab coat pocket and tossed them into the air.

"Go!!"

"Eek!?"

Six balls came flying at me, and two of them ran straight into me.

"Agagobo!"

On top of that, one of them hit me in the cheek.

It felt like a heavy punch right into my jaw, and made me feel faint for a second afterwards.

"...A-after that...?"

I asked, unsure of what Rika meant, prompting her to roar back at me in a voice full of anger,

"...The day you ran away I can let slide, but you didn't show up at all the week after that, so I started wondering what you were up to and what do I find...?"

"Uu..."

"You flirting with the same damn chick who tried to destroy the Neighbors Club!!!"

The six balls came flying at me again in tandem with Rika's fierce accusation.

"Ow!!"

This time I avoided all but one which hit me in the shoulder, and as I groaned from the pain it caused, I yelled back,

"...I-it's not like I was flirting with Aoi! I was just helping her do some work!"

"Oh, so you call her by her first name now too!?"

"She asked me to! What do you want me to do about it!?"

"Ugahhhhh! I can't believe you, fawning over a cheap-looking girl like that!! Seriously, people like you are so damn——!!"

BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM BAM!!

The balls came flying at me in sequence once again, but I somehow managed to dash my way around them without getting hit.

"It's not just that Aoi Yusa girl either! You were even wagging your tail like a puppy in love at that Student Council President girl too! What, got a cougar fetish!? Is that it!? What happened to that steel-like self-restraint you used to avoid falling for anyone in the Neighbors Club!? I can't believe you fell for some pretty older girl so easily, you damn closet pervert!!"

"Watch your mouth!!"

I screamed at her, unable to hold back.

"Eh...!?"

Rika's attacks stopped, most likely because of how serious I looked.

I looked Rika straight in the eye, and cleared up her misunderstanding.

"...Hinata's looks didn't make me fall for her or anything. I swear on it."

"Mu... R-really?"

"...Yeah," I said with a light nod.

".....It's not her looks, but her personality that I totally fell for."

"That's even worrrrrrrsse!!"

Crap, I just poured oil on the fire.

Rika's anger led to her taking out another three balls and then tossing them into the air as well.

The nine metal balls—— The **Nine Lives Breaker** formed a circle in front of Rika and locked onto me.

"W-wait, when I say fell for I don't mean it in a romantic way! I just mean I respect her as a person! I don't have any dirty thoughts about Hinata at all!"

As I hurriedly tried to make an excuse for myself, Rika looked at me with one eye half open, and said,

"Hmph, I wonder about that. Knowing you, you probably got lucky and saw her panties, and then told her something like 'I didn't see anything at all~' in an attempt to cover it up and act normal."

"H-how did you know about that!?"

I asked in reflex, too shocked to stop myself.

"How did you know that three days ago when I accidentally forgot to knock before entering the Student Council room that I got an eyeful of Hinata, Aoi, Akane, and Karin almost completely naked because they were all in the middle of changing into their jerseys!?"

.....Snap.

I think I just heard one of Rika's blood vessels pop from all the way over here.

"JUST DIE ALREADYYYYY!!!"

The nine balls spread out into a larger circle before coming at me faster than ever.

I had no way of dodging the balls flying at me from every frontal direction, which left me with no choice but to be hit repeatedly.

"...Gobh... Ugh... Ah... Kh...!"

Unable to withstand the damage, I finally fell down on my knee .

Rika was also breathing heavily as she glared at me.

"...Haa.... Haa..... You know, I really want to kill you now. I should've brought a railgun like that one popular anime heroine's, not this weak little toy. It'd actually be pretty simple to make you know."

"I don't really know what that is, but I'm sure having one'd get you arrested under the Swords and Firearms Control Law..."

I spat out as I wearily stood myself back up, to which Rika responded by laughing and saying,

"The Swords and Firearms Control Law defines a 'gun' as a device that fires bullets via the use of pressurized air. It has no bearing on a railgun."

"...Thanks for the pointless trivia..."

I said with a wry smile as I tried to hide the pain I was in.

Still, this is no time to be joking around... I need to do something about this soon... I might really die here.

Rika said her balls were weak, but you can hurt, and even kill someone barehanded.

Each hit from the **Nine Lives Breaker** is just a bit weaker than the punch I took from this one punching machine in 8th grade that I set a new record with, the best in my life actually (I don't remember what it was called though).

Those balls have to be fairly light for them to float in the air like that too.

Hence, while they might be limited in terms of power, it's still dangerous to keep getting hit by them.

What do I do about this...

Sadly, I'm not exactly unfamiliar with fighting, but today is the first time I've ever done *something like this*.

The way I usually win is by making the first move in order to get a psychological edge on my opponent, and then using my face and voice to bluff their will to fight away.

However, that kind of bluffing won't work on Rika.

After all, this isn't a fight with some random punks. This is my first time fighting against *someone who knows me very well*.

As I was thinking about what to do next,

"Gafh!"

I took another hit in the gut and let out a groan.

...Damn it, if I don't do something about those nine balls we won't even be able to calm down and talk to each other.

I've gotta... stop them.

I solidified my will, and glared at Rika. Specifically, the cat ears on her head.

Those irritating cat ears that have been constantly moving around this whole time.

They'll always stand straight up as if trying to intimidate me when the balls come to attack me, and they'll gently rock back and forth a lot when the balls are hovering around near Rika as well.

Rika said that the **Nine Lives Breaker** is controlled by her brain waves.

That cat ear headband is most likely—— No, definitely some kind of antenna that transmits Rika's orders to the balls.

The answer's simple then, I'll just take it from her.

If I do that, she shouldn't be able to use the **Nine Lives Breaker** anymore.

Rika shot out the nine balls towards me once more.

I made a wide lunge to the side, dodging every single one of them, and then made a mad dash towards Rika the next second.

"Uohhhhhhhh!!"

"...!"

Rika's eyes opened wide in shock after hearing my roar and seeing me charging at her.

Rika turned around, lab coat and all, and tried making some distance between me.

I'm not letting you get away!

I was just a few centimeters away from reaching her cat ears when all of a sudden,

THUD THUD THUD THUD THUD THUD THUD THUD!!

"Aguah!?"

A string of fierce attacks hit me in the back out of nowhere, causing me to flop onto the ground.

"Phew... That scared me a bit there."

Rika exhaled after getting a safe distance away from me with the nine balls back to hovering around in front of her.

I guess she can shoot the balls at me not only from nearby her, but also re-aim them and shoot them from far away as well.

"Damn it..."

"...Sheesh, can't let my guard down around you, can I!"

She fired the nine balls at me again, as if trying to finish me off.

"That's my line!"

I leaped up and then quickly crouched down as I sprinted underneath the balls and towards Rika.

"Kh!?"

Rika started to run away from me again as well.

I took another attack from behind, this time in my shoulder, sending a sharp pain through my entire body.

Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, the other balls came back, circled around in front of me, and then rammed themselves into me.

"Kgh!?"

I went down onto my knee, unable to stand the double-sided attack.

Rika looked worn out too as she yelled,

"...Sheesh! Just knock it off already!"

"Again, that is *my* line!"

THUNK THUNK THUNK THUNK THUNK THUNK THUNK THUNK!!

I made a quick dash backwards and somehow managed to avoid the next set of nine attacks.

The nine balls each ran into the ground and then bounced up, forming a wide shape around me before continuing their attack.

"Damn it!"

I stayed alert for a chance to get close to Rika as I jumped around avoiding, blocking, and getting hit by the unpredictable attacks from the balls.

However, Rika would back off any time I got close to her, cleverly running away so as not to get caught.

"Damn it, quit running away! Coward!"

"Y-you're the one person I don't wanna hear that from! Agh, ugh!"

Rika yelled back at me and choked violently as a result.

She was starting to look even more tired than before.

Well, she is running around while controlling those balls with her brain waves at the same time. Maybe doing that takes a lot of stamina to pull off.

"I asked Sena-senpai after that too you know!"

Rika screamed without interrupting her attack.

"Huh!? Asked her what!?"

I screamed back while dodging said attack.

"I asked when she started to get interested in you!"

"!! ...Bgofh!?"

Rika's words took me by surprise, causing me to take a hit in the stomach.

"Apparently you saved Sena-senpai from a group of thugs at the pool! Aren't you so damn cool!!"

"Yeah, but they weren't thugs, they were just hitting on her!"

Also, things only got as bad as they did because Sena just had to provoke them.

I honestly feel a little bad for those guys. They got hit by a wave of insults and then got a little roughed up by me when all they did was go up and talk to a cute girl.

"Aha, so even you used to have a manly side to you, huh! Too bad you're such a pathetic loser now!!"

"S-shut up!!"

"Then after that you stayed over at her house and raised a bunch of flags with her too, huh!! Funny how you never mentioned that to us!"

"D-don't give me that flag crap! This isn't some galge!"

I yelled with a pair of red cheeks, but Rika ignored me and continued on,

"Apparently she practically asked you out when we all went shopping in Nagaya too!"

Nagaya...

...Is she talking about when Sena asked me if I wanted a girlfriend or not?

...Or does she mean when Sena said "There is no way that any human I, *the* Sena Kashiwazaki, am interested in could be a boring person."?

Whatever the case,

"Even if she 'practically' asked me out, she didn't actually do it so it doesn't count!"

"You pathetic loser sack of shit!!"

"Gaha!?"

She landed a blow right in my solar plexus, sending an intense pain through my body and causing me to feel faint.

Rika then said, as she continued to pant heavily,

"...Then we find out you're engaged to her, and that you're childhood friends with her too!? What is with that cheating little rich girl...!? Honestly, it's so ridiculous that if this was a galge you'd be forced into the Sena route no matter what choices you make! Rika hates cheat characters like that, they make games boring!"

My movements, having become dulled due to the pain, led to me being hit again and again by the balls flying at me.

"...Uagh...! ...T-tell that, gueh! ...T-to Sena, gefoh! N-not me...!"

Rika ignored my feeble protest, and said,

"...Even worse, thanks to that Yozora-senpai's all mopey and in full loser mode now."

"...Can't do anything about that, I mean, her memories were a huge emotional support for her..."

Yozora's memories of being with me 10 years ago were incredibly important to her.

No, they're important to her even now.

I guess it's because of her good memory, but she even remembered things that I'd forgotten a long time ago.

Having Hasegawa Kodaka as her oldest friend was like a major part of Yozora's identity.

However, that part of her identity was shaken up by the fact that Sena knew me even before that, and was involved with my family as well... It's only natural she'd be shocked after learning that.

"Hah."

Rika exhaled as though mocking me.

She then appeared incredibly irritated as she stated,

"Who cares what order you met in? Who cares about what memories you have? If you wanna say that crap is more important than what you have right now, then you can just spend the rest of eternity sucking on your mama's titties, ya' god damn idiot!"

"Haha... You don't—— pull any punches, do you..."

A wry smile leaked out onto my face before I knew it.

She's got a point, I get what she's trying to say.

But, people's feelings just aren't that simple.

"...Actually wait, by that logic, don't you have no right to complain about me getting along with Aoi and Hinata?"

"Fueh!?"

Rika made a stupefied look on her face after hearing my sudden idea.

Looks like I hit a sore spot.

"...Uh... Umm... That's, umm... Yeah, well...

That's different!"

"What!?"

I barely managed to avoid Rika's sudden attack she'd launched in an attempt to change the subject.

I decided to use this chance to try and get close to Rika.

"Kh..." went Rika as she retreated, and then yelled at me,

"God damn, raising flags with every damn girl you meet...! What are you, some harem love comedy protagonist who gets stupidly popular just for being nice!?"

"OH JUST SHUT THE HELL UPPPPPPP!!"

Her example was so ridiculous I couldn't help but shout back at her.

I took a hit from each of the nine balls straight on and felt wobbly, but even so, this time I forced myself to stay up.

".....A harem love comedy protagonist...?"

As I weakly shuffled my way towards Rika, whose eyes were open wide in shock, I yelled at her.

"If I could be one—— then I'd love to be! I'd love to bring everything to a happy end just by being dense and a little nice! But I can't do that... I'm not the protagonist of some story. I'm powerless when faced with some huge problem, that's why I'm so lost right now damn it!!"

"*You're* getting mad at *me*!? How pathetic can you get!?"

Rika's attacks continued from all sides.

My face, chest, legs, arms, and legs were struck again and again, but even as I was getting beat to a pulp, I didn't stop walking towards Rika. I mean, I *am* used to getting attacked from all sides.

"I know that I'm pathetic, you retard!"

"Uu..."

Rika winced, and then slowly retreated while facing me.

"Yeah... I'm pathetic... I'm weak...! But I can't help it, this is my first time facing something like this. This is the first time I've found such an amazing place to be. It's an incredible place where people like you, Yozora, Sena, Yukimura, Maria, Kobato, and I can just be ourselves. And I... absolutely do not want to lose that place!"

"You damn..... idiot!!"

Rika said, spitting out her words before launching her biggest attack so far on me.

"Aguh...!?"

"You don't want to lose the place you can be yourself!? Well that's just great, aren't you admirable! But you're still wrong!"

"How am I wrong!?"

"Because, you're holding back and not being yourself!"

"......!"

Rika's yell was almost like a scream, and I stopped in my tracks after hearing it.

"...First you play dumb and go 'Hahh, sheesh...' and sigh like a mere bystander in order to protect the place you found where people a little different from the rest of the world can be themselves! But then you run away when you can't do that anymore! What point is there in protecting that wonderful place you found if you're not even in it, you idiot!! I got some news for

you, the world ain't that nice! You can't protect the things important to you with such a cheap act of self-sacrifice! Get over yourself, moron!"

"Like you're one to talk, idiot!"

"!?"

This time it was Rika's turn to be yelled into silence.

I resumed my wobbly advance forward, and said,

"Who're you calling a self-sacrificing bystander, huh!? You're the one who's always, *always* acting full of energy, but at the same time doing tons of stuff behind the scenes to keep the Neighbors Club running damn it! Even now, you're here playing the bad guy! Which one of us is really holding back!? Drop the condescending guardian act, nobody cares that you're a little grown up, have some communication skills, and read the mood, got it!? What are you, our mom!? Honestly, I'm more grateful than you could ever imagine for all the stuff you do for us, but...! **What do *you* want to do!?**"

clang.

Rika retreated so far her back hit the roof's fence.

Rika hung her head down, and whispered, in a tiny emotionless voice,

"...What do I want to do...?"

"...Isn't that... obvious...?"

She asked in a barely audible voice, and then raised her face.

She stared me down with a dazzlingly strong will in her eyes, and then...

"I want friends!!"

She finally said her honest wish, the one she'd hidden all this time.

And, at the same time, the **Nine Lives Breaker** dug into every part of my body.

"Guah...! Aga...!"

My entire body was aching with pain, but I withstood it and reached out for the cat ears on Rika's head just a meter away.

Yet another wave of attacks assaulted me.

My sides, cheeks, shoulders, thighs, butt, shin, upper arm, the back of my head, and spine all took a severe amount of damage.

But even so, I refused to give up and at last my desperately outstretched hand grabbed Rika's cat ears.

Surprisingly, the headband they were attached to came off easily.

Given that they were actually a machine, they were a good deal heavier than they appeared. So much so, in fact, that it'd probably hurt your neck to wear them for a long time.

I tossed the headband with the cat ears down onto the ground.

"...Heheh."

I may have been beaten and bruised, but I still managed to wring out a victorious smile.

——At that very instant, nine different blows struck my body.

"Heh?"

The **Nine Lives Breaker** I thought I'd disabled was still working just fine for some reason, and thus, now finally at my limit—— I collapsed face up on the ground with a stupid look on my face.

Rika looked down on me with a faint wry smile, and then took her left hand out of her lab coat pocket for the first time since we started fighting.

...In her hand, was a remote control with an analog stick attached.

"Sorry, Senpai. I lied when I said it was controlled with my brain waves."

Rika moved the analog stick with her thumb, and when she did the nine balls all glided through the air in tandem.

She then pushed a button on the remote, which caused all the balls but one to fall to the ground.

"It's... radio controlled...?"

"Tehepero(･<)" went Rika as she showed me an impish smile and grabbed the one remaining floating ball.

"Incidentally, this is the only one I was controlling with my thumb, the other eight are made to follow it automatically. It looked like they were all moving individually though, right? That's 'cause I added some chaos theory into the algorithm it uses."

Rika triumphantly explained, although I didn't really get any of it.

I slowly turned my aching neck and looked over at the cat ears on the ground, and asked,

"...Eh... Then... What was that... for?"

"It's just a toy. It reads the brain waves of the person wearing it, and moves the cat ears accordingly. They stand straight up when you're focused, and rock back and forth when you're not."

".....Wh... What the heck..."

Thunk.

I was so exhausted I simply let the back of my head fall to the ground. Ow.

I stayed like that for a bit, taking deep breaths. I could feel the cold air filling my lungs and spreading out through the rest of my body.

".....Haha... You're... pretty good..."

Rika giggled after seeing me laugh as well, and then added,

"...You're not bad yourself."

No sooner had Rika finished saying that than did she lean back against the fence and wearily slide down until she was sitting flat on the ground.

"What... you're done for too?"

"...Honestly, just standing was getting hard for me. I'm not very athletic you know."

Rika said along with puffs of white breath coming out of her mouth.

"S'cause you don't eat breakfast." I casually commented back.

"You might be right..." Rika said with a wry smile.

"......Kodaka-senpai."

"...Yeah?"

"...If you run into a huge problem you can't solve by yourself... then come to Rika for help. Who the heck do you think I am? I'm the genius inventor, Rika Shiguma, you know. ...I can easily... make the impossible."

After hearing Rika's brazen, yet kind words, I thought to myself .

We just fought each other on the roof, and told each other how we really feel.

We even did that shonen manga cliché of complimenting each other after the fight.

Honestly, at this point, how could I possibly *not* admit it?

No matter how you think about it, all I can do now is move on forward.

Not moving even a single step forward after doing all this would be too pathetic, even for a pathetic loser like me.

Still, it's gotta be pretty arrogant for a pathetic loser like me to even think about wanting real friends, or true friendship after all that I've done.

That's probably why,

".....Hey, Rika."

"Yes?"

"Will you be my friend?"

...In response to my "confession",

"Eh? What'd you say?"

Rika teased me by playing dumb.

"...No, don't give me that 'What'd you say?' crap... Man, having someone say that to you is actually pretty irritating..... Sorry for saying it before..."

I felt incredibly stupid and started to blush as I reminisced about my past self.

"What nonsense are you talking about now, Senpai?"

Rika's usual aloof smile rose to her face, and she then said, as casual as can be,

"I mean, aren't we friends already?"

This time, those words were not lost in the wind. They clearly echoed across the entire rooftop under the clear December evening sky.

Shortly after, we both burst into laughter.

We simply laughed and laughed, unsure of what we were even laughing about.

It was almost like a revival of Sora and Taka from 10 years ago —— but it was also fundamentally different.

Sora isn't here.

And... neither is Taka.

The prideful Taka, who yelled "I'm not a weakling!" and recklessly attacked even the helping hand offered to him is no longer here.

It's not the loner Taka, but the weak and pathetic Kodaka Hasegawa who is here now.

A helplessly normal high schooler not dense enough to remain ignorant of the miracle that occurred around him, yet also too frail to simply accept that miracle.

"...Rika, can you help me?"

If I can't do anything alone, then I'll ask my dear friends for help .

"Sure thing."

Answered my friend—— Rika Shiguma, in a light tone of voice with a natural smile on her face.

Thus, the long long prologue has finally ended.

As the pathetic comedy ends, the curtains on the equally pathetic love comedy rise.

And to start with, I think I'll go give Sena Kashiwazaki a reply ——

The End.